

# APA PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE GUIDELINES for Operational Psychology

**OPERATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE GUIDELINES TASK FORCE (OPPG TF)**

APPROVED BY APA COUNCIL OF REPRESENTATIVES  
**AUGUST 2023**



**AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION**



### **Acknowledgement**

This document was developed by the Operational Psychology Practice Guidelines Task Force (OPPG TF). 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 of 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 and 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 Task Force appreciates the dedicated efforts of members of the Committee on Professional Practice and Standards (COPPS) and Board of Professional Affairs (BPA) in providing feedback to the Task Force on APA policy on guidelines and for facilitating the review of this document in accordance with Association Rules 30-8. The Task Force also acknowledges and thanks APA boards and committees, divisions and other groups, internal and external to the Association, for their important input and collaboration, and members of the APA Practice Directorate who provided appropriate guidance and support in accordance with APA policy on guidelines during the extensive development and review process of these proposed guidelines.

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### **Suggested Citation**

<https://www.apa.org/about/policy/operational-psychology.pdf>



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Purpose and Scope	3
Guidelines for Practice in Operational Psychology	7
References	15

# INTRODUCTION

Operational psychologists provide a variety of psychological services in support of national security, national defense, and public safety. Their work may include the assessment of personnel for high-risk positions, consultation to investigations and crisis negotiations, support to military or intelligence training and operations, or other types of psychological and behavioral assessments. The practice of operational psychology differs in important ways from other practice areas and has developed significantly over the past 20 years.<sup>1</sup> This history has not been without controversy related to operational psychology in the context of national security interrogation and detention operations (Staal & Harvey, 2019). To address specific questions of conduct and to clarify these matters, the APA commissioned an independent review that culminated in new policy approved by the APA Council of Representatives. Debate continues around the appropriate role of psychology in national security settings (APA, 2015b; Arrigo et al., 2012; Staal, 2018). Emerging from this debate was recognition of the need for an ethical framework to inform the field of operational psychology. Given developments in the field, debate about the proper roles of psychologists in national security settings, and psychologists' ongoing need for guidance, these *Professional Practice Guidelines for Operational Psychology* are provided to benefit operational psychologists, the recipients of their services, and other affected parties (APA, 2021a).

## 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. It is generally assumed these guidelines will be used by practitioners who are subject to the legal authority of the U.S. government. In situations where the practitioner is operating abroad, the assumption is that services are provided under the auspices of the U.S. government. These guidelines make clear that operational psychologists conduct their activities in accordance with the APA Ethics Code and APA policies related to national security, including policies prohibiting psychologists from participating in national security interrogations (APA, 2015b).

### What is Operational Psychology?

Operational psychologists provide services to different clientele across practice settings. They are often referred to as 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 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; Moret & Greene, 2019). Operational psychologists come from different types of training programs, although doctoral degrees in clinical psychology are most common. Professional certification courses reside in all major practice communities (intelligence, military, and law enforcement), and these training courses are critical to development of the skill set. Although the various 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, 2020). 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; Lowman & Cooper, 2018), sports psychologists (e.g., providing human performance enhancement training), or police psychologists (e.g., conducting consultation to investigative teams). Thus, psy-

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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 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 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 and 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 & Williams, 2011; Kitaieff, 2011; McCutcheon, 2017; Staal & DeVries, 2020; Staal & Stephenson, 2006, 2013; Stephenson & Staal, 2007; Williams et al., 2006). Training in operational psychology is available in predoctoral and postdoctoral settings, and the American Board of Police and Public Safety Psychology—an affiliated American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) specialty board—now certifies psychologists practicing in related domains. Scholarly debate regarding the role of psychology in this area of practice remains ongoing (Arrigo, Eidelson, & Rockwood, 2015; Soldz, Arrigo, Frakt, & Olson, 2018; Staal & Greene, 2015; Staal, 2018).

chologists 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 tasks that are not health care related, such 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; Kitaef, 2011). Practitioners whose professional duties align with the description of operational psychology are encouraged to consider the present guidelines.

### **Compatibility with the Ethics Code and APA Policy on Guidelines**

The APA's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (EPPCC; APA, 2017a, under revision), provides an ethical framework for these guidelines. In the remainder of the document, the term "guidelines" is used to reference statements that suggest or recommend professional behavior. 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 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. These guidelines align with ethical principles that direct operational psychologists to take reasonable steps to avoid harming those with whom they work, and to minimize harm when it is unavoidable (APA Standard 3.04(a)), and that psychologists do not participate in, facilitate, assist, or otherwise engage in torture or in any other cruel, inhuman, or degrading behavior (APA Standard 105 3.04(b)).

### **Compatibility with Legal and Regulatory Frameworks**

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 to be used as the basis for disciplinary action or practice liability complaints. When applicable federal and state laws and regulations supersede this guidance, efforts are made to reconcile such discrepancies to the greatest extent possible consistent with these guidelines and the APA Ethics Code. Similarly, in situations where applicable international law or treaty supersede this guidance (e.g., Geneva Conventions; United Nations, 1949), operational psychologists seek to address any conflicts or discrepancies that arise consistent with these guidelines. Consistent with the APA Ethics Code, these guidelines are in line with APA policy on human rights (APA, 2021a).

### **Documentation of Need**

The determination and documentation of the need for these guidelines is based on public benefit and the need for professional guidance in this area, in alignment with APA policy on guidelines (APA, 2015a).

**Public Benefit.** Psychologists supporting national security, national defense, and public safety may hold special positions of public trust and confidence. The work of operational psychologists may have an impact on the security and safety of nations, states, tribes, and local communities. Furthermore, their roles and activities are not specifically addressed by any other guidelines. Given the sensitivity of their duties, the often-classified nature of their work, and the controversies associated with their practice community, operational psychologists may find such guidelines to be of significant value. Operational psychologists are mindful that their work seeks alignment with the public good.

**Professional Guidance.** Psychologists operating in national security, national defense, and public safety may 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 may provide valuable guidance 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 may be 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** refers to the rights inherent to all human beings. Such rights exist without regard to race, sex, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, 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; United Nations, 2021; APA, 2021a). Consistent with APA policy on diversity, these rights extend to all people without regard to national origin, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, spirituality, disability, age, immigration status, military or veteran status, and language (APA, 2021a; APA, 2021b; APA 2022).

**National Defense** generally refers to the responsibility of governments to maintain and protect their sovereignty and citizenry through the formation and maintenance of a military and related services. It also includes “programs for military and energy production or construction, military or critical infrastructure assistance to any foreign nation, homeland security, stockpiling, space, and any directly related activity (US Code 50, 2023a).”

**National Security** generally refers to the responsibility of governments to maintain and protect their sovereignty and citizenry. It often encompasses aspects of “national defense, foreign intelligence and counterintelligence, international and internal security, and foreign relations. This includes countering terrorism; combating espionage and economic espionage conducted for the benefit of any foreign government, foreign instrumentality, or foreign agent; enforcing export controls and sanctions; and disrupting cyber threats that are perpetrated by nation states, terrorists, or their agents or proxies” (Department of Justice, 2023).

**Operational Psychology** refers to the application of psychological science to the operational activities of national security, national defense, and public safety. These services may occur through a consultative relationship that enables clients to understand, develop, and/or influence individuals, groups, or organizations more effectively. Operational psychology is considered an applied practice domain, and as such is intended to address real-world problems that are operational in nature and occur within the context of national security, national defense, and public safety. It is not an application of healthcare service provision, rather, it focuses on organizational effectiveness and individual performance in areas involving national security, national defense, or public safety.

**Operational Psychology Practitioner** or **Operational Psychologist** refers to a psychologist engaged in the practice of operational psychology, defined above.

**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 may not be 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.”

**Public Safety** generally refers to actions conducted by state or local government to ensure the protection of its territory and citizenry including to “protect the safety of life, health, or property” (US Code 47, 2023b).

**Subject** refers to any individual, group, or organization that may be the focus of the services provided by the operational psychology practitioner. Subjects also may be clients requesting services but might not necessarily be 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 may be 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.

## Compatibility with APA Policy

These guidelines are grounded in and compatible with the EPPCC (APA, 2017a, under revision), as written, and should be considered in conjunction with them. In addition, these guidelines are intended to be consistent with other guidelines, including but not limited to, *Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology* (APA, 2013a); *Occupationally Mandated Psychological Evaluations* (APA, 2018); *Guidelines for Psychological Assessment and Evaluation* (APA, 2020); *Consulting Police Psychologist Guidelines* (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016); *Psychological Fitness-for-Duty Evaluation Guidelines* (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009); and *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedure* (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 has reached sufficient critical mass within the practice community to warrant inclusion in these guidelines. Seminal works in the field have been identified and referenced accordingly. Additional consideration of diverse 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 or Task Force). The OPPG TF was composed of psychologists identified by their respective APA divisions, national board associations, and national security, national defense, and public safety communities. The participation of professionals from a wide range of backgrounds was sought to increase diversity of subject matter expertise, practice settings, theoretical orientation, and thought; it was not intended to serve as—and does not necessarily represent—endorsement by their respective organizations.

The appointment of each participant followed a simple and straightforward process. APA divisions that we believed contained a significant constituency of operational psychologists (or related practitioners) were identified. Next, we asked each APA division's president for an independent nomination from within their membership to the task force. We extended a similar request to relevant national board presidents and experienced senior operational psychology practitioners. The process by which each entity chose to identify and nominate a representative from their organization, division, or board was left to appointed leadership and not directed by the task force. The outcome of this nomination process was a Task Force diverse in its experience, perspective, and background, while common in its depth of knowledge and community representation. Task Force members-at-large were identified based on their individual subject matter expertise and recognized contributions to this area of practice. In no instance has any agency, governmental department, or branch of service nominated, appointed, or directed membership to this task force. Furthermore, none of our members' current work placements carry any endorsement for their membership or contributions to the task force.

The OPPG TF was encouraged to voice opinions and opposition and to solicit advice, input, and guidance from their communities and any source they deemed relevant. As a result of these strong efforts to ensure representative voices and perspectives, the OPPG TF members engaged in rigorous and spirited debate at times. Ground rules established at the outset facilitated 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 often the goal and generally achieved. The OPPG TF did not move forward with guideline development

until consensus was found in accordance with the ground 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 of 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 and 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 facilitation and review of this document in consultation and coordination with the Board of Professional Affairs and the Committee on Professional Practice and Standards. A guidelines proposal was submitted for consideration for adoption as APA policy, and underwent significant substantive policy review, along with legal review, in accordance with Association Rules 30–8. The OPPG TF appreciates the opportunity to receive this input and otherwise connect with individuals and groups providing diverse ideas and feedback. Of note, these guidelines received extensive review and input from psychologists experienced in the areas of social justice and human rights advocacy and the TF is grateful for their thoughtful engagement and recommendations.



# 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

In accordance with the APA ethics code, operational psychology aims to benefit clients and improve society predominantly through contributions to national security, national defense, and public safety. In most circumstances, a primary obligation may be afforded to the nation, organization, or community that needs to be served and protected. Advancing the needs of the client, often a governmental organization, may be an important consideration, mindful of competing obligations and responsibilities to affected parties.

### Application

Operational psychologists strive to benefit their clients and enhance national security, national defense, and public safety in many and diverse ways. In alignment with APA policies and the Ethics Code, they may 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, 2020; Staal & Harvey, 2019). In most of these activities, their work simultaneously may impact multiple individuals and organizations, including clients and other parties (Kennedy & Williams, 2011).

For example, when assessing candidates for positions in national security, national defense, or public safety settings, operational psychologists may contribute to decisions that impact these candidates as well as their organizational clients. Because candi-

dates for national security positions may differ in their suitability and motivation (Picano et al., 2012), the resultant hiring decisions also may impact the nation, organization, and community 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 their 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 national origin, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, spirituality, disability, age, national origin, immigration status, military or veteran status, and language, 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 other parties; and (e) take reasonable steps to promote welfare and avoid or minimize foreseeable harm (EPPCC Standards 3.04, 3.07, and 3.11[b]; APA, 2021b; APA, 2022; also see Moret & Greene, 2019).

Special care and consideration may be 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 may restrict access to individuals outside of those settings. Accordingly, in alignment with APA policies and the Ethics Code,

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 law enforcement 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 records information management.

Operational psychologists may work in high-threat settings, internationally and domestically. Accordingly, security requirements may dictate the operational psychologist refrain from providing full disclosure of their personally identifying information, 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, 3.11[b], 4.01, 4.02, 4.05, 9.04, and 9.10; cf. Standard 8.07).

Operational psychologists' work activities may involve risk to 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 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 seek relevant training that prepares practitioners for such work and reduces the risk of harm (EPPCC Standards 2.01 and 3.04). In addition, operational psychologists 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.

#### 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, and national security, national defense, and public safety settings may be diverse and dynamic. Achieving and maintaining competence in areas pertinent to the work of operational psychology may be difficult given (a) the professional isolation 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. 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 may 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 adversarial subject, 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 (to include the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and other relevant factors [APA, 2021b; APA, 2022]), ideologies and beliefs, lifestyle, and attitudes of the adversary's populace; and consider the body of research relevant to their activities (e.g., persuasion and influence approaches).

Operational psychologists take care to restrict their services to only those areas within the boundaries of their competence (EPPCC Standard 2.01). When considering the required level of competence to perform an operational support activity, operational psychologists weigh 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. Additionally, operational psychologists strive to fulfill continuing education requirements in competency areas relevant to their work inclusive of human and civil rights, social justice, ethics, multicul-

turalism, diversity, and other 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 et al., 2017; Myers & Trent, 2019), principles of influence and persuasion (Goodman-Delahanty & Howes, 2016), cultural competence (Christopher et al., 2014; Hardin et al., 2014), training curriculum development (Abt et al., 2016), cognitive bias in decision science (Beauregard & Michaud, 2015), and others (APA, 2013b; Carretta et al., 2015; Dawson & Thomson, 2018).

Advances in technology may 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, managing cognitive workload, and addressing the risks of cognitive bias (EPPCC Standard 7.01).

Operational psychologists seek to establish and maintain awareness of emerging threats and issues relevant to geopolitical actors and adversaries. They may do so through currency in national security, national defense, and public safety doctrine and priorities (Department of Defense, 2022; Director of National Intelligence, 2023; President of the United States, 2022). Such awareness may be linked to the purposes of their assessment or consultative services. Operational psychologists seek to communicate with their

clients in a manner that reflects this broader contextual understanding.

### 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 affected parties.**

#### Rationale

Organizational demands and perceived societal needs may 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 avoid participating in practices that are illegal or unjust or that violate the rights of others. Consistent with the Ethics Code, operational psychologists strive to promote justice and human rights for others (APA, 2021a; EPPCC Principles D and E; United Nations, 2021).

#### Application

Whether working in national security, national defense, or public safety, operational psychologists may encounter circumstances in which client and perceived societal needs conflict with individual interests. Operational psychologists seek to balance these potentially competing interests by adhering to legal, regulatory, and ethical requirements; using reliable data collection procedures that are the least invasive necessary for meeting client demands; 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, 4.04[a], 9.01, and 9.06).

For example, in national security, national defense, or public safety 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 (APA, 2018, 2020). Due consideration is paid to the applicability of job analyses, validation, and competency modeling to establish the job relevance of psychological attributes being assessed (Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology, 2018). Operational psychologists use multiple sources and methods to gather relevant data while keeping in mind 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 (EPPCC Standard 4.04[a]).

Although operational psychologists may not function as ultimate decision-makers within the organizations they serve, their opinions may be given substantial weight by decision-makers. To the fullest extent possible, therefore, operational psychologists strive to recognize that this work may inform rather than dictate 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 explain the underlying bases for their decisions, and they acknowledge limitations as appropriate.

In the unusual circumstances when ethical responsibilities of operational psychologists may conflict with organizational demands, perceived societal needs, human rights, or legal or regulatory authorities, operational psychologists seek to 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 1.01, 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 report such findings through appropriate channels.

Operational psychologists seek to respond swiftly if they observe behavior that violates applicable law, moral standards, human rights, or ethics. 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 their ability to maintain access to classified or otherwise sensitive information (Doran et al., 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, etc.; EPPCC Standard 1.05). They also refer legal matters to appropriate legal authorities as required, and they consider withdrawal or removal of their support from the project or activity accordingly.



#### GUIDELINE 4

### **Operational psychologists remain vigilant in 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 (EPPCC Standards 2.01[e] and 2.02). Operational practitioners also assume responsibility for seeking consultation from more experienced practitioners and assessing and continuously evaluating their competencies, training, experience, and risk management approaches required for competent practice (EPPCC Standard 2.03). Core competency in operational psychology includes, but is not limited to, familiarity with current controversies, relevant APA policies, and reports of prior abuses (APA, 2015b).

#### **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, national 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.

One of the many challenges facing practitioners of new or emerging specialties is the lack of a comprehensive research literature and the absence of relevant training programs. For example, to increase cultural sensitivity and team cohesion, multinational military units may request the aid of operational psychologists in addressing force integration. U.S. military forces often partner with different countries' militaries, and in many instances very little is known or published about the sociocultural or ideological considerations relevant to a given country's military personnel and their units. There may not be appropriate assessment instruments, normative data (American Educational Research Association, 2014), or psychological research on the host nation's organizational behavior, communication patterns, or team-related psychology (Staal & Bluestein, 2019). In such instances, operational psychologists seek to identify appropriate data if available, strive to consult with peers and experts in the area of study, and collaborate, when possible, with the host nation's psychologists. Lastly, they take care to limit their statements, conclusions, and interventions in accordance with the absence of valid and reliable resources that might otherwise guide their work.

At times, operational psychologists may be called to provide support to high-risk training programs that emerge out of operational necessity but for which little is known about their effectiveness or the risks to trainees and instructors. For example, shortly after the military established its Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) training programs—

designed to aid military personnel held captive by enemy forces—it sought the support of operational psychologists to reduce risk to students and instructors based on their shared high-stress, high-risk training environment (Hiller Lauby & Morgan, 2022). At the time, little was known about the risks of behavioral drift, moral disengagement, or various cognitive biases that might impact the training. Furthermore, little was known about the effectiveness of the training curriculum and design of the training programs. As such, operational psychologists took care to study the training environment, gather data on student outcomes, and identify and apply appropriate research literature in these areas to reduce risk and better train SERE instructors.

When facing such challenges, operational psychologists seek to weigh the potential positive impact of their presence and support, with the risks of their association with the training and its outcomes. When such programs clearly lack effectiveness or present potential harm and risk to individuals and trainees, operational psychologists identify these risks, seek to make their concerns known, and strive to remove their support accordingly.

Operational psychologists continually strive to grow their expertise beyond basic-level requisite competence. Professional development is sought through formal coursework, additional training, consultation, and mentorship from operational psychologists 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.

#### GUIDELINE 5

### **Operational psychologists strive to balance the demands of their organizational clients and societal needs with due regard for the autonomy, dignity, and well-being of affected 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; this includes attention to such values as beneficence, nonmaleficence, fairness, and justice (APA, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

#### **Application**

In national security, national defense, and public safety settings, operational psychologists may face potentially conflicting demands. While supporting organizational clients, operational psychologists may contribute to adverse outcomes for individuals, who may or may not be aware of the operational psychologists' involvement. These situations raise concerns about informed consent and potential harm (Arrigo et al., 2012; Soldz et al., 2016). 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 (Myers & Trent, 2019; Neller, 2019). Securing a subject's informed consent in such circumstances may be impossible or unreasonable (APA, 2013; Foote, 2016; Koocher, 2009; Myers et al., 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 their involvement or lack of involvement would likely have on various outcomes; and (d) balance the demands of the organization and society against the impact on the well-being and rights of individuals (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 information is sufficient, (c) report only that which 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 6

### **Operational psychologists strive to take reasonable steps to identify and resolve 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 seek the best interest of society and their clients' goals while simultaneously considering the impact on affected parties. 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 (EPPCC Standards 1.01, 1.03, 3.06). Such factors may include issues of diversity in its many forms in addition to privileged power and position. When conflicts arise, operational psychologists seek to manage them responsibly and in an ethical manner that promotes

welfare and minimizes harm (EPPCC Standard 3.04).

#### **Application**

Some operational psychologists may be embedded in the units to which they offer services, and therefore may encounter ethical challenges similar to those of psychologists who practice in rural community settings or as internal consultants to industry. For example, they may act as special staff advisors to senior leaders; *ad hoc* project consultants to middle management; trainers; and performance enhancement coaches. 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 may be linked to the actions of their clients, and as such, they seek to separate or remove themselves from involvement in 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 & Landsinger, 2017; Kennedy, 2022; Moret & Greene, 2019). In doing so, they 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.

When one or more competent peers are 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 they may be called upon to perform potentially conflicting roles that could impair their effectiveness, operational psychologists may take reasonable steps to clarify and modify, or withdraw from, roles as appropriate (cf. EPPCC Standard 10.2). When

managing such conflicts, they strive to seek supervision or consultation, as necessary.

For example, in public safety settings, operational psychologists embedded within crisis negotiation units may assume a variety of responsibilities (Craw & Palarea, 2022; Augustin et al, 2011). 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 (e.g., Neller et al., 2021), 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 After Action Reviews (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 CNT performance in future operations.

Similarly, when embedded in compartmented programs in national defense settings, operational psychologists may be the sole providers of a wide variety of services delivered to multiple individuals. 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; reassess personnel periodically to support determinations of continued fitness, counterintelligence risk, or other organizational needs (Picano et al., 2017); consult to peers and command staff on organizational development; and provide coaching

services to all program personnel as needed (EPPCC Standard 2.01).

Operational psychologists in national security positions also might 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 prevent disclosure of 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 these 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 professional relationships; and they refrain from entering relationships that could reasonably be expected to impair their objectivity, ethical decision making, competence, or effectiveness in performing their duties, or that otherwise risk exploiting or harming their clients or other parties (EPPCC Standards 3.05[a], 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 strive for maximal compliance with the EPPCC (EPPCC Standard 3.05[b]). As conditions change, operational psychologists seek to ensure relevant parties are aware of any shifting roles and functions, as necessary, while striving to fully cooperate with coworkers (EPPCC Standard 3.09).

## GUIDELINE 7

### **Operational psychologists strive to consider factors of equity, diversity, and inclusion 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 the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, spirituality, disability, age, national origin, immigration status, military or veteran status, and language (APA, 2021b, 2022). Furthermore, operational psychologists strive to appreciate the power imbalance that may arise from identity privileges and position, and they attempt to eliminate the effect of any resultant biases in the performance of their professional activities (APA, 2021d). They take precautions to ensure any potential biases do not condone unjust practices. Lastly, at times such inequities may reside systemically or structurally within the systems or organizations for which operational psychologists are providing services. Practitioners remain alert to such risks and seek to identify and mitigate their negative impacts (APA, 2021c).

#### **Application**

Psychologists working in national security, national defense, or public safety may conduct assessments and activities outside of the United States, which increases the salience of paying consideration to diversity. But diversity may pose challenges 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, 2017b), diversity presents significant challenges to the systematic study of individuals: Most psychological research has been conducted on Western, educated, and industrialized populations (Cheon et al., 2020; Rad et al., 2018); theories of motivation, needs, relational styles, and cognitive processes differ among cultural groups (Christopher et al., 2014; Shealy, Bullock, & Kapadia, 2023); and measures thought to be culture-free or culture-fair may, in practice, be neither (Staal, 2012). Moreover, a host of cultural and racial biases and related risks are well known (Hardin et al., 2014; Swencionis & Goff, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017). 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. When available norms are insufficient or interpretation requires culture-specific considerations, operational psychologists strive to make known resultant challenges and limitations. They also remain aware of their continual responsibility to evaluate assessment measures and methods (e.g., cognitive ability tests, personality tests, integrity tests, structured interviews, assessment centers, situational judgment tests) for their adverse impacts on the populations they serve; remain aware of, and reduce the impacts of, their own biases on assessment outcomes; and evaluate both the validity and the utility of assessment tools and methods with diverse populations.

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 may require the services of an interpreter. When working with interpreters, operational psychologists (a) take reasonable steps to assess the professional qualifications and delineate expectations of the interpreter prior to commencing activities, making clear any rules of confidentiality (see EPPCC Standard 2.05); (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). When working with an interpreter, operational psychologists strive to possess a sufficient understanding of the ethnic and cultural background of the subject, including subcultural differences in language.

Operational psychologists strive to remain aware and knowledgeable of applicable laws, and ethical standards, regulations, cultural considerations, diverse needs, and other guidelines that inform their ethical practice when working with diverse populations. They seek to use such 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 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 legal parameters 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).

When offering consultation, operational psychologists endeavor to remain aware of individual and group differences relevant to issues of diver-

sity and seek to understand systemic or structural inequities in the organizations and systems they serve. Such awareness and acknowledgment may be critical in providing subsequent opportunities to address these disparities. When such inequities are found, operational psychologists strive to make them known to others, raise their concerns to their client, and seek to resolve any conflict present. Practitioners have an ethical responsibility to remove themselves from environments in which such inequities cannot be satisfactorily addressed.

#### GUIDELINE 8

#### **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. They recognize that failing to 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 of 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 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (1978), *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedure* (Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology, 2018), *Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology* (APA, 2006), *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (APA, 2014), *Multicultural Guidelines: An Ecological Approach to Context*,

*Identity, and Intersectionality* (APA, 2017b), *Professional Practice Guidelines for Occupationally Mandated Psychological Evaluations* (APA, 2018), and other empirically informed guidelines, principles, or practices that are widely accepted by the operational psychology community. At times, operational psychologists may encounter methods or procedures that may appear culturally appropriate but lack empirical support for their employment. In such instances, operational psychologists proceed cautiously, and remain sensitive to issues of equity, diversity, and inclusivity (APA, 2023).

### **Application**

Operational psychologists seek to employ assessment procedures that produce valid and reliable information for the contexts in which they are used (EPPCC Standards 9.02, 9.08[b]). They also seek to guard the integrity of the psychometric properties of tests and ensure that the conditions of administration indicated in test manuals are preserved when adapted for use with national security, national defense, or public safety personnel or purposes. Operational psychologists strive to use test norms derived from similar populations or comparative samples when available. They seek to recognize the limitations of all such instruments and procedures, and to be ready to address these limitations and their potential impact (EPPCC Standard 9.06). In this spirit, operational psychologists recognize that test results may guide the decision-making process rather than provide conclusive results.

Operational psychologists may be faced with challenging assessment-related tasks. They may be asked to assess individuals with unique backgrounds or diverse cultural and ideological identities. Assessments may target unique skill sets or require performance evaluations of novel applications of existing job skills. For example, when operational psychologists were asked to design and implement a personnel suitability assessment program for military remotely piloted aircraft (RPA), they were faced with an

emerging technology for which no job analysis or normative data existed. However, a large repository of data regarding the assessments of pilots and aircrew for traditional aircraft was available. Pending a thorough job analysis, operational psychologists relied on existing personnel selection literature nested in related areas of study while collecting data to establish appropriate norms. Until sufficient normative data existed, it was incumbent on practitioners to identify limitations and qualify their recommendations accordingly.

Requested assessments may also require remote or indirect methods. Such assessments may rest on a review of archival documents, collateral sources of information, and other reporting as opposed to a direct assessment of or engagement with a given subject. When conducting remote or indirect assessments, operational psychologists take care to ensure their assessments are based on the most relevant, empirically validated, and current data available. Furthermore, when making statements or reporting their assessment findings, they strive to identify limitations to their work and seek to communicate these limitations to their clients, including their use in some national security settings (APA, 2015b).

### **Expiration**

This document will expire as APA policy in 5 years (2028). The Task Force acknowledges the pending Ethics Code revision and recognizes the potential need to adjust these guidelines based on this revision. Correspondence regarding the Professional Practice Guidelines in Operational Psychology should be addressed to the American Psychological Association, Practice Directorate, 750 First Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20002-4242.

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