



# **Psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code: A rapid review**

**C Pretorius**

 **[orcid.org/0000-0002-0844-8833](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0844-8833)**

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Supervisor: Prof E van Rensburg

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Student number: 24160407

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## **PREFACE**

This study is presented in accordance with the article format as required by the 2018 General Academic Rules of the North-West University. The article and a copy of the guidelines for authors for the relevant journal are included in Section 2.

The student is the first author of the article, while the supervisor is the second author.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explored psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code using a rapid review methodology. A review of the literature identified relevant published studies on the perceptions of psychologists towards an ethical code. A qualitative research approach, more definitively, a rapid review, illuminated existing literature related to psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code. The identified studies were subjected to inclusion and exclusion criteria and critical appraisal. Data was collected through a data extraction table and analysed through thematic synthesis.

Results indicated that psychologists have different perceptions about the code of ethics and that several interconnected factors influence the interpretation of an ethical code. It appears that individual, psychological, and contextual factors may play a role in psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code. Individual factors include conflicting personal and professional values, perception of unmet professional needs and a challenging grasp of the code of ethics. Psychological factors include the perception that the code is emotionally frustrating, problematic, and controversial because of multiple explanations and a lack of practitioner consensus regarding ethical and unethical behaviour. Contextual factors that may influence the perception of an ethical code include cultural factors, the psychologist's age and level of education, and their professional growth throughout their career.

The results indicated that personal factors could not be excluded when an ethical code is being developed, reviewed, interpreted, and implemented. The issue of personal factors in interpreting and executing an ethical code is an intriguing and controversial yet significant one. If the debate is to be moved forward, a better understanding of psychologists' individual perceptions of an ethical code could advance further research and inform the implementation of a professional, ethical code.

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Recommendations are made to facilitate the execution and publication of additional studies to strengthen the existing body of knowledge addressing the influence of psychologists' personal factors on interpreting and implementing an ethical code.

**Key terms:** Beliefs, values, perceptions, attitude, Rapid review, ethical code

## **OPSOMMING**

In hierdie studie is sielkundiges se persepsies van 'n etiese kode ondersoek deur middel van 'n vlugtige oorsig. Relevante literatuur wat fokus op sodanige persepsies is geïdentifiseer. 'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering – spesifiek 'n vlugtige oorsig – het as uitgangspunt gedien om sielkundiges se persepsies van die etiese kode uit die bestaande literatuur bepaal. Die geïdentifiseerde studies is onderwerp aan in- en uitsluitingskriteria en kritiese beoordeling. Data is versamel met 'n data-ekstraksietabel en geanaliseer deur tematiese sintese.

Resultate dui daarop dat sielkundiges verskillende persepsies oor etiese kodes het en dat die interpretasie van etiese kodes deur verskillende faktore beïnvloed word. Dit sluit in persoonlike (individuele), sielkundige en kontekstuele faktore. Individuele faktore lê opgesluit in die botsing tussen persoonlike en professionele waardes; sielkundiges se belewenis van gebrekkige professionele behoeftevoorsiening en 'n verwarrende begrip van die etiese kode. Sielkundige faktore is vervat in die persepsie in dat die kode emosioneel frustrerend en kontroversieel is as gevolg van veelvuldige verklarings en die gebrek aan konsensus oor wat as eties en oneties beskou word. Kontekstuele faktore wat die persepsie van 'n etiese kode kan beïnvloed, sluit in kulturele faktore, sielkundiges se ouderdom en vlak van opleiding en die professionele ontwikkeling wat met verloop van tyd in hulle loopbaan plaasgevind het.

Die resultate dui daarop dat persoonlike faktore nie uitgesluit kan word in die ontwikkeling, hersiening, interpretering en implementering van 'n etiese kode nie. Die kwessie van persoonlike faktore in die proses van interpretering en implementering van 'n etiese kode is terselfdertyd verwikkeld, omstrede en tersaaklik. Indien die debat oor sielkundiges se werksetiek verder gevoer word, kan 'n indringende begrip van individuele persepsies omtrent 'n etiese kode nuttig toegepas word in toekomstige navorsing.

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Aanbevelings word gemaak vir die publikasie van aanvullende studies om die bestaande literatuur oor persoonlike etiese persepsies in die implementering van 'n professionele etiese kode te vergemaklik.

Sleuteltermes: Waardes, persepsies, etiese kode, vlugtige oorsig

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## **SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE**

### **1.1 Introduction**

In this rapid review, psychologists' perceptions regarding ethics and the code of ethics will be identified and analysed as found in the literature. A rapid review follows similar critical principal steps of a systematic review, but evidence synthesis is provided promptly; thus, rapid reviews can overcome a key barrier, such as the lack of timely and relevant research. A general introduction and the rationale are described within the first section, followed by the problem statement and orientation. The following section pertains to a literature analysis of the origin of ethics, the definition of ethics, ethics in professional behaviour, ethics in the profession of psychology, the history of an ethical code, and the importance of an ethical code. The role of values and perceptions in professional ethics is outlined, particularly, how values influence psychologists' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions when referring to an ethical code. Lastly, a description of the study's research question and the research methodology is included.

### **1.2 Problem statement and orientation**

The profession of psychology is eternally indebted to ethics, as no amount of expertise, pedigree, competence, or technique can solely contribute toward a successful practice, let alone a prosperous career (Fulmer, 2018). Psychology necessitates a commitment to unwavering professional values and moral conduct to ensure ethical practice (Kirkcaldy et al., 2021). Thus, professional psychological practice is regulated by an ethical code. The ethical code in the profession of psychology reinforces public trust in the competency, integrity, and validity of the valuable work in which psychology professionals engage (Walsh, 2015). The evolution of psychology from a discipline to a profession is attributable to an ethical code through the public statement of principles related to ethics (Allan, 2011).

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The American psychologists' ethical code was first established in 1933 by the United States-based Association of Consulting Psychologists (Dunbar, 1994; Sinclair, 2012). The American Psychological Association (APA) initiated an ethical code designed explicitly for psychologists to publish a provisional code in 1953 (Pettifor & Sawchuk, 2006; Sinclair, 2012; Walsh, 2015). The ethical code established by the APA was subsequently identified as a point of departure that influenced the development of most psychological ethical codes around the world. According to Sinclair (2012), the APA ethical code is perceived as the golden standard since it remains one of the most influential codes globally. Nevertheless, Walsh (2015) pointed out that the procurement of the original ethical code was based on the foundation of psychologists' perceptions and interpretations when considering situations as ethical or unethical. The result was developing an ethical code that constitutes moral aspirations and practical standards to reinforce rules of conduct.

The moral foundation of the APA ethical code served as building blocks in the development and revision of national, regional, and international psychological associations' ethical codes, for example, the British Psychological Society (BPS), the Australian Branch of the British Psychological Society, and the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Allan & Love, 2010). Moreover, the APA ethical code also reverberated to and influenced the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) to regulate the South African ethical code for psychologists (Cooper, 2012). Globally, a substantial number of ethical codes have been established for psychologists, although a scant few managed to become universally significant.

An ethical code ensures that individuals conform to the profession's ethical standards, thus protecting the public's welfare and reputation (Fisher, 2016). Presently, two main objectives of a professional ethical code exist. Firstly, it attempts to enhance favourable behaviour by establishing guiding principles that foster reflection and decision-making within

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a moral framework (Sinclair, 2020). Secondly, the monitoring of professional behaviour occurs, and disciplinary action may be taken against those who contravene prescriptive and enforceable standards of conduct (Pettifor & Sawchuk, 2006; Sinclair, 2020). However, no ethical code can ensure good behaviour (Knapp et al., 2020).

Additionally, psychologists require applicable moral principles or values to cultivate professional behaviour (Sinclair, 2020). Inevitably, the code of ethics represents the profession's core values (Truscott & Crook, 2013). By nature, the practice of professional psychology necessitates judgment, and no code holds the ability to anticipate all the dilemmas that may occur (Knapp et al., 2020). Although, according to Knapp et al. (2020), an ethical code can establish aspirational norms for psychologists to follow since personal and contextual factors direct and influence actual behaviour and the interpretation of an ethical code.

Ethics depicts several irrefutable principles and moral values expected to direct ethical conduct (Walsh, 2015). Morals or ethics are acquired through a process of moral learning (Railton, 2017). Moral learning is the procurement of moral understanding through domain-general learning processes, generating expectations and continuously guiding perception throughout life (Railton, 2017). Professional ethical codes are believed to provide an essential source of ethics learning content since the ethical code in psychology has numerous fundamental components, consisting of values, standards, and principles. It is crucial to grasp the concept of values to comprehend the nature of an ethical code.

Values can be described as a belief system comprising what is moral, right and good to determine desirable situations (Prilleltensky, 2001). Principles are considered general standards of ethical conduct based on values, employed to inform independent decision-making and interpretation by professional psychologists (Leach et al., 2012). According to Walsh (2015), the profession of psychology reflects the ethical values of autonomy,

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beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Standards aim to elucidate specific behaviours and actions required by professional psychologists since a regulatory body enforces standards (Leach et al., 2012). However, developing into an ethical psychologist encapsulates far more than simply following a set of rules. It is expected that psychologists possess the ability to discern their boundaries of competencies and limitations of expertise (O'Donohue et al., 2003). A crucial indicator of competence includes a practitioner's knowledge of ethics and ethical conduct (O'Donohue et al., 2003). Thus, the professional competence required to behave ethically is an intricate process because professional psychology constitutes a discrete culture characterized by traditions, values, and ethical principles (Bashe et al., 2007). Therefore, the procurement of an identity as an ethical psychologist is a sinuous journey that deserves greater attention (Bashe et al., 2007).

The significance and interwovenness of personal values are theoretically reinforced by acculturation theory (Jenkin et al., 2021). Handelsman et al. (2005) developed the theory of ethical acculturation based on the framework of cultural acculturation proposed by Sam and Berry (1997). The process of ethical acculturation was explicitly designed for the effective transition of psychologist attitudes, values, and beliefs when entering the profession of psychology (Anderson & Handelsman, 2011). A fundamental process in psychologists' ethical development is the acculturation to the ethics of the psychology profession since it is indicative of the degree to which a practitioner identifies with both their personal values and the values of the profession (Jenkin et al., 2021).

Handelsman et al. (2005) identify four different dimensions in the process of ethical acculturation. The first dimension indicates *maintenance* that refers to identifying with the profession of psychology to sustain identity and characteristics. When entering the profession of psychology, the need for adaptation may fluctuate in preference to retain the original values and traditions. Sam and Berry (1997) associate the second dimension with *contact and*

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*participation* that indicate the practitioner's ability to identify with the profession of psychology (Handelsman et al., 2005; Li & Ai, 2020). High identification with the profession of psychology refers to acknowledging potential in the values and traditions of professional psychology. According to Sam and Berry (1997), *maintenance*, contact, and participation influence the acculturation strategy depending on the attitudes towards the four alternatives and their manifestation. It is essential to develop an ethical identity built on knowledge of the ethical code, professional behaviour, and virtues and values to facilitate and create a new contemporary identity in psychology (Li & Ai, 2020; Sam & Berry, 1997). Thus, ethical acculturation can be seen as a dynamic process where individuals and the culture of professional psychology face constant change leading to continuous adaptation. Sam and Berry (1997) state that adopting an integration strategy seems to be the most functional acculturation strategy, as integration occurs between the new values of professional psychology and the old values of the psychologist. According to Sam and Berry (1997), integration is followed by the assimilation strategy, which means that the new values of professional psychology are ultimately adopted, resulting in the abandonment of personal values (Anderson & Handelsman, 2011). Separation is the third strategy identified by Sam and Berry (1997) and refers to well-developed inherent ethical sense but the failure to identify with the values of psychology. Lastly, Sam and Berry (1997) recognize marginalization as the most problematic acculturation strategy due to the absence of identification with both the new values of professional psychology and the psychologist's values.

According to Handelsman et al. (2005), suboptimal behaviour may manifest when psychologists only concern themselves with minimal adherence to the ethics code or are solely informed by personally held beliefs and intuitions. Additionally, it is explained by Handelsman et al. (2005) that optimal ethical behaviour manifests when psychologists integrate personal ethical values within their professional context. The model of acculturation

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and adaptation created by Berry (2003) and Sam and Berry (1997) stipulates a structure for ethics integration that allows applied understanding in the transition from personal to professional (Handelsman et al., 2005; Li & Ai, 2020).

Although there is no shortage of academic literature about the importance and enforcement of the code of ethics, exiguous literature explores the beliefs and opinions regarding how effective a code is in guiding ethical behaviour (Yallop, 2012). Therefore, the use of an ethical acculturation model supports the socialization of psychologists, especially in the accession of an ethical identity (Anderson & Handelsman, 2011). Available literature confirms that the APA has developed elaborate ethical principles and standards of practice to guide professional behaviour. Even though a crucial component within the promotion of the ethical practice of psychotherapy is the affinity with the ethical code, it remains insufficient (Barnett, 2019). The discernment or attitude with which the code of ethics is interpreted will be a deciding factor in the relevance of ethical principles in a situation (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). However, few studies explore the ethical beliefs and attitudes of psychologists towards the ethical code. It remains unclear whether the movement in psychology has resulted in general changes in the perception towards an ethical code. In light of the aim of this study, perceptions will be seen as aspects that include values, beliefs, and attitudes regarding an ethical code. Therefore, the use of a rapid review study will illuminate information found in existing literature related to psychologists' perceptions towards the code of ethics.

### **1.3 Ethics as construct**

The concept of ethics is a predominant feature in many professions, including psychology (Cruess et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2020). Professions are synonymous with a specific branch or area of skill and expertise, a predetermined level of training, and adherence to a set of ethics as outlined in a code (Sinclair, 2020). The origin of ethics, the definition of ethics,

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ethics in professional behaviour, ethics in the profession of psychology, the history of an ethical code, the importance of an ethical code and the role of values, perceptions in professional ethics are provided below.

### 1.3.1 The origin of ethics

The etymological derivation of ethics and morals have long been distinguished (Walker & Lovat, 2017). Ethics originated from the Greek term *ethos*, referring to character, whereas morals originated from the Latin term *mores*, referring to customs (Walker & Lovat, 2017). The notion of ethics emanated from Aristotle's fundamental philosophical underpinning that a virtuous or noble life pursuing may stem from both good moral and ethical behaviour (Sinclair, 2020). Moral philosophy and ethics are synonymous as the interrelation involves judgment and values (McGavin, 2013). Welfel (2015) believes that morality lies at the very core of ethics.

Walsh (2015) elucidated the concept of ethics as the collection of aspirational moral principles and values purposive to facilitate ethical conduct. Strohm Kitchener and Anderson (2011) expanded the notion of ethics by identifying five perspectives of moral philosophy incorporated by the literature in psychology. *Virtue ethics* is introduced as the first perspective, which concentrates on an ideal rather than the obligatory intentions or the consequences (Strohm Kitchener & Anderson, 2011; Teo, 2015). Secondly, *deontology* emphasizes that the intention is determined by the actions corresponding to certain principles and respect for absolute and universal ethical rules of conduct (Strohm Kitchener & Anderson, 2011; Teo, 2015). The third perspective, *consequentialism*, refers to the consequences of actions (Strohm Kitchener & Anderson, 2011; Teo, 2015), followed by *relationality* concerned with the authentic care for the importance of the relationships in which we engage. Lastly, *communitarianism* refers to the collective ethical action derived from community values and traditions (Strohm Kitchener & Anderson, 2011; Teo, 2015). The

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identified five perspectives of moral philosophy are essentially embedded in psychology, and individuals use these approaches to define choice, behaviour, solution, or attitude as being ethical.

Concluding thus, morals are considered to be the beliefs that ensue acceptable and proper behaviour as informed by societal norms, where ethics encompasses the conceptual studies and theories that arise from implementing and preserving moral behaviours (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 2008), thereby highlighting the fact that ethics and morals are intricately interconnected and indeed informing each other.

### **1.3.2 Defining ethics**

Ethics is extensive, consisting of various theoretical and practical orientations (Decker et al., 2021). The term *ethics* refers to a comprehensive structure of values informing an individual's behaviour (Jacob et al., 2016). Additionally, ethics is considered a system comprised of learning, core values, and professional conduct for professional contexts and needs (Koocher & Campbell, 2016). Ethics can establish a universal or natural criterion to govern conduct and critically analyze the validity of conduct and rules or values established by societies (Cabrera, 2020). Considering the above definitions, Knapp et al. (2020) advise that professional ethics refer to applying those ethics to a specialized profession. When evaluating the definitions above, this study will consider ethics to be a framework of moral values or virtues and principles that guide professional behaviour. Consequently, Psychology necessitates ethics as moral behaviour in terms of doing what is good and proper for the profession itself, the professionals in psychology, the public or broader society, while improving and continuously evaluating ethical practices (Rossouw & Van Vuuren, 2010).

### **1.3.3 The role of values and beliefs in professional ethics**

Ethics includes understanding personal beliefs, consequently leading to the combined knowledge and wisdom borne of careful study, a rationale for one's moral actions, and

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collaboration (Freeman, 1999). Hence, an ethical code can by no means ensure ethical behaviour (Truscott & Crook, 2013). Ethical codes are considered established values, standards, and ethical attitudes and behaviour (Pettifor, 2004; Truscott & Crook, 2013). In reality, professionals may have different views with regards to which values are important to uphold. Similarly, the concept of ethics and ethical behaviour may be interpreted differently.

Ultimately, ethical behaviour is not ensured through the comprehension of an ethical code (Morrissey & Reddy, 2006). Ethical training in peer consultation, decision-making models, and continuous professional development is crucial when developing ethical practice skills.

Ethical training and adequate experience will inform and guide the development of an ethical stance that enables psychologists to take responsibility for decisions and utilize professional judgment when ethical dilemmas arise (Barnett, 2019; Morrissey & Reddy, 2006).

#### **1.3.4 Ethics in professional behaviour**

The process of professionalization is when an occupation is transformed into a vocation with the attributes of a profession (Shaffer et al., 2010). Accordingly, a profession identifies a specific workforce, called professionals, that demonstrate exclusive training, expertise, and knowledge (Beckett & Maynard, 2013). Thus, professional behaviour, attributes, and socially constructed skills in professional practice reflect professionalism (Allan & Moffett, 2016). Therefore, the term *professional* is related to membership of a profession, engaging in roles in a responsible, sensitive, and functional manner.

In essence, the prominence of a profession is determined by two qualities. First, it has its own competencies, and second, its own ethics (Strain et al., 2009). Professional ethics illuminates morality and are concerned with proper professional conduct (Fisher et al., 2007). Professional ethics disseminate the core values and beliefs developed to inform the behaviour

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of the members belonging to a specific profession regarding their interaction with the public (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2008). As such, ethical conduct associated with the profession of psychology refers to the manifestation of behaviour based on judgements of obligation, following well-justified ethical principles and informed by the established relationship with a social institution or related individuals (Green et al., 2007).

### **1.3.5 Ethics in psychology as a profession**

The inception of psychology is set in the seventeenth-century philosophy of Descartes and Locke (Leary, 1980). Initially, psychology emerged as a moral science (Sinclair, 2020). However, during the nineteenth century, psychology separated from philosophy and developed into a distinct academic and scientific discipline (Sinclair, 2020). Following the differentiation, psychology attempted to mirror the professionalization pathway of medicine (Pilgrim & Treacher, 1992) since the medical field's professionalization is well documented. Ultimately, medicine contributed to a template of professionalization for psychologists (Totton, 1999).

One can therefore postulate that at the heart of professional psychology lies professional ethics. Professional ethics represent the unanimity of established values that guide the desired conduct expected of practising psychologists (Cottone et al., 2021). More specifically, through performing duties within the scope of competence identified as doing no harm, protection of confidentiality and privacy, avoidance of exploitation, practising towards aspirational ethics of the profession as opposed to bare minimal guidelines, and behaving ethically, it serves as a framework to ensure the welfare of the client and public (Corey et al., 2014).

In conclusion, ethical practitioners will conduct themselves according to the standards and values of practice adopted by a given profession (Welfel, 2012). In essence, professional ethics is the foundation on which the social contract between psychologists and the public are

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built and implicitly/by implication considered the foundational competency expected of professional psychologists (Kaslow et al., 2007).

### **1.3.6 The history of an ethical code**

Ethical code development stems from as far back as when Hippocrates established the Hippocratic Oath in circa 400 BC to delineate the obligations and duties of medical practitioners and students (Kumar, 2010). Principles underpinning the Hippocratic Oath represent the crucial components of various ethical codes across various professions, including psychology. These principles were identified as a dedication to administer beneficial treatments, practice congruence within one's scope of competency, and refrain from causing harm (Siggins, 1996). In the early 20th century, psychology started to function as a professional discipline providing services to the public (Sinclair, 2017). However, the concept of ethical conduct only became relevant during the Second World War when the Nazis were researching humans in the name of science (Sinclair, 2020). These events essentially led to the inception of the first professional ethical code, namely The Nuremberg code in 1947, followed by the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 to eliminate unregulated practices (Sinclair, 2020). The development of an ethical code is a crucial requirement for a profession (Sinclair, 2020). Similarly, the professional ethical code is a crucial indicator of a profession's maturity, independence, and legitimacy (Barrett et al., 2012).

According to Welfel (2015), an ethical code refers to a document that outlines the standards of care adopted by a specific profession. Ethical codes incorporate ethical standards comprised of specific rules adopted by professional members (Cottone et al., 2021). Ethical standards are based on fundamental ethical guidelines identified by ethical principles (Cottone et al., 2021; Truscott & Crook, 2013). The six basic ethical principles enlightening ethics in the field of psychology are the following: autonomy, which refers to the right to self-determination; beneficence, meaning the active contribution to the well-being of others; non-

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maleficence, defined as refraining from harm; justice, which is equivalent to fairness or equality; fidelity, which refers to keeping promises and commitments; and the principle of respect that underpins both human rights law and ethics (Allan, 2013). Ethical codes must be enforceable by professional associations, as they help define fundamental components such as competency and minimum professional qualifications (Giorgini et al., 2015). Similarly, Levitt et al. (2015) advocate that consistency and structure are essential components required to ensure public trust in professionals and to guarantee that qualified and competent individuals serve the public.

As such, the primary directive of professional ethical codes is to provide a research framework, simplify ethical decision making, help protect professionals, and improve the status of the entire profession (Spielthener, 2015). However, ethical codes, once developed and established, are regarded as living documents. Ethical codes are continuously influenced by how they evolve and grow (Pettifor et al., 2005), resulting in the need for adaptation in the face of change from society, the environment, ongoing ethical discourse and dialogue.

### **1.3.7 The importance of an ethical code**

Ethical codes are obligated to assist psychologists and enable them to comprehend and identify with psychology's historical context and culture (Bashe et al., 2007; Cottone, 2007; Schank & Skovholt, 2006). Ethical codes aim to regulate psychological practice. However, they do not indicate rules of conduct, professional standards of behaviour, or human rights statements. Rather an outline of principles, values, and standards to facilitate behaviour and attitudes within a profession is provided by an ethical code (Pettifor, 2004; Truscott & Crook, 2013). Essentially, the continuous evolution of ethical codes strives to strike a balance between being descriptive and prescriptive. Thus, ethical codes promote ethical principles, values, and standards of integrating codes of ethics into practice (Bashe et al., 2007; Truscott

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& Crook, 2013). Ethical codes should be considered resources for professional psychologists since they articulate standards for acceptable behaviour and define good practice.

These commitments are acknowledged in the fundamental values on which all ethical codes are based. Beauchamp and Childress (2019) state that these values include the following: *Beneficence* refers to the commitment of providing benefit to those encountered in our professional roles. *Nonmaleficence* refers to the responsibility to prevent or avoid exploitation of and harm to those we serve. *Fidelity* is concerned with the requirement to fulfil professional obligations in professional roles. *Autonomy* signifies the obligation to promote clients' independent functioning, and *justice* involves the obligation to enhance fair and equal access to professional services, ensuring consistent professional services with prevailing professional practice standards.

### **1.3.8 Advantages of an ethical code**

In the professional domain, ethical codes are the instrument through which members of a specific profession are informed regarding ethical, moral, and socially acceptable behaviours (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2007). The fundamental principles and values of a profession are embodied within ethical codes, thereby defining the professional group's specific responsibilities towards each other and to whom they serve (Pope, 2003). The public is informed of the practice standards they may expect from a registered practitioner through the ethical code to facilitate the consistency of practice across a profession and ensure that there are guidelines for resolving ethical dilemmas (Allan, 2013). An ethical code's function pertains to promoting moral behaviours, protecting individuals, and preserving their rights. Legal or professional consequences enforce the ethical code, and consequences may include criminal proceedings, fines, loss of privileges, restrictions on one's activities, or licence to practice in a profession (Leach et al., 2015).

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Moreover, the aim of an ethical code, from a practitioner's perspective, is to assist a professional in their services and duties and resolve ethical dilemmas through aspirational guidelines (Pettifor & Sawchuk, 2006). From the perspective of individuals who utilize the practitioner's services, an ethical code functions as an instrument of protection regarding the clients' interests, who may be regarded as society's most vulnerable members (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2007; Merrell et al., 2011).

### **1.3.9 Limitations of an ethical code**

An ethical code represents a social agreement wherein the discipline is given bounded autonomy over its entry requirements, training, methods, and practice (Sinclair, 2011). In return for this autonomy, the professional commits to safeguard the public's welfare by providing services representing the highest commitment to ethical standards (Gothjepsen & Truscott, 2018). Thus, professionals might assume that their training, professional associations, and devotion to professionalism guard them against unethical behaviour resulting in the assumption that familiarity with the profession's code of ethics is sufficient for ensuring ethical practice (Barnett, 2019).

In truth, there are multiple consequences associated with this assumption (Barnett, 2019). Firstly, the code of ethics is insufficient in predicting and anticipating every possible ethical dilemma and challenge one may face throughout their career (Barnett, 2019). Secondly, the revision and updating of ethics codes occur continuously because of acknowledging their possible obsolescence over time and the need to ensure their ongoing relevance (Barnett, 2019). Thirdly, the drafting processes and the contents of ethical codes differ considerably between countries and cultures (Vitolla et al., 2021). Fourthly, the process of adopting and implementing ethical codes differs significantly in different countries due to the divergent control cultures and methods of contrasting opportunistic and unethical behaviours (Vitolla et al., 2021).

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Lastly, despite the clarity and guidance of some of the standards in the ethics code, others are often found broad and, therefore, difficult to apply to situations that are often characterized by complex and diverse decisions (Barnett, 2019). Although familiarity with the ethics code is of great importance for promoting the ethical practice of psychotherapy, this is not sufficient.

### **1.4 Contextualisation of the study**

The profession of psychology has the privilege to deal with the most personal aspects of human behaviour and experiences. In return, it is expected of psychologists not to compromise their profession. For this reason, psychology is regulated by a code of ethics that represent the core values of the profession.

Increasingly, the focus on public transparency of professional practice has placed psychologists under an ethical spotlight, bringing about increased awareness of ethical codes and the need for moral behaviour (Van Tonder et al., 2011) even if, in reality, ethical codes are not always clearly deciphered, interpreted, or applied (Johnson et al., 2021).

To practice ethically, psychologists need to be aware of their own values, beliefs, and morality, also known as ethical acculturation (Handelsman et al., 2005). The process of ethical acculturation encapsulates more than just conforming to a linear learning process. Instead, it involves a continuous process of active reflection and balance of personal morality, obtaining knowledge, exploring culture, considering the context of practice, and the codes of ethics (Bashe et al., 2007). The underlying values and beliefs of psychologists are thus imperative to how psychologists perceive and implement an ethical code (Handelsman et al., 2005). The perception of an ethical code will further determine the behaviour of a psychologist.

To add, the personal values of a practitioner may conflict with an established standard within an ethics code, and this conflict may imply challenges of a different nature (Corey et

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al., 2014). The lack of adherence to ethical standards in professional psychology has caused universal concern and anxiety during the last decades (Corey et al., 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to understand how psychologists perceive an ethical code to contribute towards training purposes and prevent ethical transgressions.

This rapid review study aimed to explore literature and information about psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code. The focus was on how psychologists' perceptions may play a role in implementing the code of ethics. The findings of this study contributed to a better understanding of psychologists' perception of an ethical code and the impact it had on adhering to an ethical code.

### **1.5 Review question**

The following research question guided this study:

*What are psychologists' perceptions as found in the literature regarding ethics and an ethical code?*

### **1.6 The aim and objective of the study**

The proposed study aimed to identify and understand the perceptions of psychologists as found in the literature regarding ethics and the code of ethics to synthesize valuable information on the perceptions of psychologists of an ethical code. This study proposed to provide a thorough and quality-controlled basis of evidence of research regarding the perceptions of psychologists on an ethical code. Such evidence may play a significant role in successful training and the understanding and possible prevention of ethical transgressions.

### **1.7 Research methodology**

The following paragraphs delineate the research approach and the subsequent design of the research study.

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### **1.7.1 Research design**

A rapid review study was conducted, and through obtaining data, the research question was addressed. Rapid reviews are similar to that of a systematic review; however, it is an accelerated process in which knowledge synthesis occurs through streamlining or omitting specific methods to produce evidence for stakeholders in a resource-efficient manner (Tricco et al., 2017). However, through adhering to core principles related to systematic reviews, the rapid review remains systematic and ensure the avoidance of bias in the inclusions, assessment, and synthesis of studies (Schünemann & Moja, 2015). The specific steps for conducting a rapid review process, as identified by Tricco et al. (2020) and suggested by Dobbins (2017), were adhered to during the execution of the rapid review study.

#### **1.7.1.1 Phase 1: Search for keywords in databases**

Keywords have been identified during a general literature review by examining psychology journals and textbooks related to the topic. Boolean operators were matched with the keywords, their most common synonyms and the inclusion criteria to identify the following search levels: (“Perceptions” OR “attitudes” OR “opinion” OR “experience” OR “view” OR “reflections” OR “beliefs” OR “values”) AND (“Psychologist”) AND (“Ethics” OR “Ethical code” OR “code of ethics”).

The EBSCO Discovery Services (EDS), available from the North-West University library portal, was the primary search engine. The EBSCO Discovery Services (EDS) provides access to numerous other databases such as Academic Search Premier, CINAHL with full text, Science Direct and PsycINFO. These, among others, will be included in the research strategy.

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### **1.7.1.2 Phase 2: The inclusion and exclusion criteria**

The researcher and the study leader independently reviewed the titles and abstracts of the identified studies to determine which ones should be included for additional analysis. The search was limited to studies in English published between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2020 as the timeframe selected for this rapid review. There is an identifiable gap in the literature regarding ethics research in professional psychology from the year 2000. Since scant literature addressing psychologists' ethics exists, the choice of this timeline is justified (Pettifor & Sinclair, 2011; Sinclair, 2017).

The search strategy included (a) full-text journal studies to ensure all key elements of the literature were included; (b) peer-reviewed journals, since they comply with scientific rigour and would add to the credibility of the study; (c) qualitative studies, as they provide empirical evidence, which in most incidences is explorative; (d) quantitative studies, as these studies are empirical and would contribute to answering the research questions; (e) review studies, to ensure all relevant studies are included. Studies published in conference proceedings and non-peer-reviewed were excluded since these studies may not follow principles of rigour, scientific trustworthiness, and required ethical considerations.

### **1.7.1.3 Phase 3: Critical appraisal**

This phase involves the appraisal of the selected full-text articles. The primary reviewer was directly involved with the quality appraisal, and the second reviewer only monitored the process of review and provided the necessary guidance (Haby et al., 2016). Providing assistance by ensuring that each study is scientifically based, adequately designed, and had been appropriately executed. The appraisal instrument has been adapted by using various standardized appraisal instruments. The adapted appraisal instrument consisted of the following questions: Is there a clear problem statement? Is there a clear research question? Are the aims and objectives clear? Does the study have a clear and valid research

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methodology? Are the study results clearly indicated, reported, and discussed (tables, figures, themes, etc.)? Is there a clear conclusion for the study?

#### **1.7.1.4 Phase 4: Data extraction**

The main findings and results of the included research articles were summarised, during the data extraction phase. A data extraction table was created that include the following study characteristics: title, authors and publication date, type of publication, country of publication and focus of article/document. Additionally, the conclusions and findings are considered since crucial information will be obtained through this, required for the study regarding beliefs and perceptions.

#### **1.7.1.5 Phase 5: Data analysis**

This rapid review study aimed to analyse the data using the thematic synthesis approach as it is a universally accepted method in research (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The relevant articles in the study will be qualitatively analysed in accordance with the process of thematic analysis as explicated by Braun and Clarke (2020) as a six-phase process for data engagement, coding and theme development. The most recent articulation of the six-phase process, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2020), includes: 1) data familiarisation and writing notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report.

### **1.8 Validity and reliability**

This rapid review was conducted in adherence to the stringent trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research created by Lincoln and Guba (1985), known as credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

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*Credibility.* The trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings refer to credibility (Tracy, 2010). This study strictly adhered to the rapid review methodology; thus, the second reviewer will continuously monitor the findings and progress of the primary reviewer to guarantee credibility.

*Confirmability.* The proposed research study ensured confirmability by strictly adhering to the steps outlined in the proposal regarding quality appraisal of articles, data extraction, data analysis, etcetera. A preliminary scope review was conducted to avoid redundancy and duplication. References and referencing were completed according to the APA guidelines to prevent plagiarism.

*Transferability.* Transferability concerns the aspect of applicability to different contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In order to ensure that no bias was involved in selecting articles, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were identified and adhered to before the quality appraisal stage (Verges et al., 2010). However, despite the different contexts, the data was gathered following the research question. Thus, the findings aimed to enlighten relevant literature.

*Dependability.* According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability includes consistency; therefore, the primary reviewer strictly adhered to the procedures and processes described in this research proposal ensuring the dependability and scientific integrity of the study.

## **1.9 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained as outlined by the Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University Potchefstroom campus, with approval number NWU-00426-20-A1. In order to ensure an ethical and accurate process, I complied with the ethical principles outlined by Wager and Wiffin (2011) by focusing on avoiding redundant duplication and plagiarism and ensuring transparency in the findings and the accuracy of the results. To

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prevent possible plagiarism, we observed the APA referencing guidelines and submitted the mini dissertation to Turnitin, a software program designed to detect plagiarism.

Furthermore, any potential bias in the selection of studies was reduced by determining the inclusion and exclusion criteria beforehand through the usage of a critical appraisal document. Due to the research method and a no-risk study, the study did not require participants, and the study caused no harm in a physical, psychological, or legal manner. Finally, no conflict of interest was reported.

### **1.10 Conclusion**

To conclude, section 1 consisted of an extensive overview of literature that enables the reader to understand the methodology and its suitability as outlined in the initial research proposal of this study. The essential constructs used in the study were also contextualised in an attempt to give the reader better insight into these constructs. Therefore, this literature overview served as an introduction to the research study reported in the research article (see Section 2).

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## **SECTION 2: MANUSCRIPT IN ARTICLE FORMAT**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Section 2 presents a rapid review of psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code. This article, titled Psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code: A rapid review, was compiled in preparation for the *Journal Ethics and Behavior*. The article is prepared following the journal guidelines.

#### **2.1.1 Author and submission guidelines: *Journal Ethics and Behavior***

##### **2.1.1.1 Aims and scope**

*Ethics and behaviour* journal publishes articles on an array of topics pertaining to various moral issues and conduct. These matters may include but are not restricted to: the exercise of social and ethical responsibility in human behaviors; ethical dilemmas or professional misconduct in health and human service delivery; the conduct of research involving human and animal participants; fraudulence in the management or reporting of scientific research; and public policy issues involving ethical problems. Data based, theoretical, and particularly instructive case analyses, as well as brief summaries of problem cases are also published. An editorial board consisting of specialists in ethics with backgrounds in law, medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, psychology, public health, sociology, and theology allows for a wide spectrum of perspectives toward ethical issues.

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## 2.2 Manuscript

### Psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code: A rapid review

Pretorius, C<sup>a\*</sup> and Van Rensburg, E<sup>a</sup>

*<sup>a</sup> School of Psychosocial Health and Behavioural Sciences, North-West University  
(Potchefstroom Campus), South Africa*

*<sup>a</sup> School of Psychosocial Health and Behavioural Sciences, North-West University  
(Potchefstroom Campus), South Africa*

[\\*cyrettejacobs@icloud.com](mailto:*cyrettejacobs@icloud.com); School of Psychosocial and Behavioural Sciences North-West  
University, Potchefstroom Campus, Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom; 2520, South Africa

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**Conflict of interest:** The authors declare that there are no conflicting interests relating to the study.

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### Abstract

The code of ethics in the profession of psychology does not guarantee compliance from psychologists. Complaints and examples of unethical behaviour pointing to research lacking in evidence regarding the influence of values and beliefs on interpreting the code of ethics continues to emerge from the literature. In this study, psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code were explored through a literature synthesis. The results of this study illuminated psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code. Four superordinate themes emerged from the data: (1) Ethical codes perceived as ambiguous; (2) Perception of ethical codes as challenging and frustrating; (3) Perception that beliefs influence the interpretation of the code of an ethical code; and (4) Perception that professional and contextual characteristics influence ethical behaviour.

Keywords: ethical code; psychologists; perceptions

## **Introduction**

Ethics and morality remain intricate and relevant subjects in psychology, as evident from the increasing research being conducted on morality and ethics (Heller & Phillips, 2020). The independence, maturity and legitimacy of a profession are determined by the continuance of a professional code of ethics (Barnett et al., 2012; Schwab, 2016). Therefore, in the profession of psychology, ethical codes have been created by professional organizations in an attempt to articulate the principles and standards for morally acceptable professional behaviour (O'Donohue, 2020). Optimistically, the code of ethics will influence psychologists' behaviour (O'Donohue, 2020).

Sinclair et al. (1987) identified the following characteristics of an ethical code: the existence of an ethical code signifies a group or a profession; it functions as a support document that offers guidance to individuals in the profession of psychology; it offers assistance in accomplishing the responsibilities of being a psychologist; an ethical code assists in resolving ethical dilemmas by stipulating moral principles as adopted by the profession.

The moral principles of a professional ethical code will reflect the values of the culture in which the code was created (Pettifor & Sawchuk, 2006). Since ethical codes are culturally constructed documents (Schultz et al., 2020), an effort is made to consider and respect diverse beliefs and standards based on dissimilarities in culture, religion, and political systems (Schultz et al., 2020). Universally acceptable ethical principles that epitomize human values and honour cultural differences were developed, resulting in the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (Gauthier, 2020). The following principles were identified by Gauthier (2020): (a) respect for the dignity of persons and peoples; (b) competent caring for the well-being of persons and peoples; (c) integrity; and (d) professional and scientific responsibilities to society. Nonetheless, it is essential to consider that the Universal Declaration is not an international or global ethical code (Gauthier, 2008; Gauthier

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& Pettifor, 2012), but rather a guideline for organizations or institutions to develop an ethical code (Gauthier, 2020).

Although an ethical code and rules of conduct are grounded in principle-based ethics (Kirkcaldy et al., 2020), the mere existence of ethical principles in an ethical code cannot guarantee compliance which will result in ethical behaviour (Knapp et al., 2020). By nature, the practice of psychology requires judgement, and no ethical code can or should try to anticipate all the dilemmas that may occur (Rogerson et al., 2011). Thus, these principles may be misunderstood or misinterpreted due to inadequate deliberation by different psychologists (Kirkcaldy et al., 2020) since established norms or principles cannot determine behaviour. Personal and contextual factors such as values, beliefs, level of moral development, personal biases, and other cognitive processes guide ethical behaviour (Rogerson et al., 2011). It is crucial to consider that personal biases, values, beliefs, and assumptions will influence the interpretation of an ethical code, ultimately impacting ethical decision making (Mazzula, 2017). The outcome of ethical decisions will rely on the perception of an ethical code and how it is interpreted by the practitioner (Murphy & Hecker, 2016).

The mere thought regarding psychological ethics elicits a varying psychological reaction, which typically involves feelings related to fear and anxiety associated with ethical misconduct. However, other psychologists do not give ethics a second thought, perhaps not viewing it of any direct relevance to them (Barnett, 2019; Schwartz, 2001). Thus, the truth remains that ethical practice in professional psychology is complex and multifaceted (Barnett, 2019; Kitchener, 1986) and that familiarity with an ethical code is not sufficient for promoting the ethical practice in professional psychology (Barnett, 2019). Nevertheless, few studies examine perceptions towards ethical codes whilst considering the influence that values and beliefs may have when interpreting an ethical code; therefore, the purpose of this paper is to

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gain insight into the perceptions of psychologists towards an ethical code through a literature synthesis.

### ***Ethical acculturation model***

The pilgrimage of becoming a psychologist requires the comprehension and integration of new professional values together with the pre-existing moral values (Anderson & Handelsman, 2011), thus requiring the clarification and identification of personal values, individual needs, and ethical perspectives to recognize and change the contexts in which those values are actualized (Bashe et al., 2007). Integrating the values of a profession occurs similarly to the acculturation of immigrants to a new country (Bashe et al., 2007). Based on the acculturation model developed by Berry (1990), the ethical acculturation model proposed by Handelsman et al. (2005) were specifically designed to ensure the effective transition of psychologist attitudes, values and beliefs when entering the profession of psychology (Anderson & Handelsman, 2011). The Ethical Acculturation Model is built on the notion that four strategies emerge based on the relation between the two dimensions of maintenance and contact (Bashe et al., 2007; Li & Ai, 2020).

*Integration* is the first and most desired strategy to emerge (Avci, 2017), reflecting the consistency or coherence between personal and professional identities and values (Bashe et al., 2007), indicating the inclination to maintain pre-existing values whilst exhibiting high levels of interest in the new professional standards. *Marginalization*, contradictory to integration, is the second strategy and least desired (Gottlieb et al., 2008) and characterized by a low interest in personal morality and professional values, resulting in the lack of personal as well as professional moral development (Gottlieb et al., 2008; Li & Ai, 2020). *Assimilation*, the third strategy, reflects the indifference towards personal moral values whilst exhibiting eagerness towards a professional identity (Avci, 2017), resulting in the abandonment of personal ethical standards and internalizing the ethical standards of the profession, causing

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empty, legalistic, and overly simplistic applications of ethical principles (Handelsman et al., 2005; Li & Ai, 2020). *Separation*, the fourth and last strategy, characterized by the focus on personal moral acceptances, whilst neglecting the ethical principles of the profession may lead to detrimental consequences due to not understanding the importance and necessity of applying professional standards (Handelsman et al., 2005; Li & Ai, 2020).

Navigating through the process of ethical acculturation, Bashe et al. (2007) identified the following four benefits: the prominence of ethics in professional identity and enhancing ethical knowledge; personal experiences and values are regarded as a worthy and crucial element in forming a professional identity; active integration between personal virtues and professional standards occur as ethical acculturation is a continuous process; and ethical acculturation is representative of a journey initiated by identifying personal values and professional needs and concludes with the integration thereof.

The importance of personal and values and how this interlink is theoretically underpinned by acculturation theory (Jenkin et al., 2021). Ethical acculturation illuminates the impact of values, beliefs, and moral reasoning on ethical behaviour (Knapp et al., 2017) since values and beliefs have been associated with the pattern of moral judgment and decision-making. Therefore, it was essential to compare and analyze current literature to indicate the significance of psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code.

### ***The four-stage model of morality***

The development of morality is not a single unitary process but rather an ensemble of four interacting psychological processes (Rest, 1984). Rest (1984) maintains that unethical behaviour stems from a deficiency in any one of these stages (Welfel & Kitchener, 1992) and proficiency in all four areas is stimulated through moral development (Kitchener, 1986), namely: ethical sensitivity, ethical reasoning, selection of an appropriate ethical choice, and implementation. Ethical sensitivity, the first process, is the ability to identify an ethical

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dilemma. This sensitivity towards ethics demands the ability to discern among each situation's ethical implications or nuances. (Welfel & Kitchener, 1992). The capacity to differentiate between ethical and unethical decisions and engage in a decision-making process regarding a suitable course of action is known as ethical reasoning (Welfel, 1992) since it encapsulates the ability to integrate various guides in the form of ethical codes (Kitchener, 1986).

Involved in the appropriate selection of an ethical choice is the decision, despite non-moral values such as expediency, to undertake a morally defensible action (Rest, 1984). At this point the psychologist can engage in the identification of an ethical course of action. Psychologists must, however, select whether to carry out the ethical action despite attractive non-ethical values (Welfel & Kitchener, 1992). The fourth component of morality, implementation, is executing an ethical action despite considerable pressures to act differently (Welfel & Kitchener, 1992).

The process of acculturation in the profession of psychology is ultimately affected by moral development because the extent of moral development within a psychologist will not only impact the choice of acculturation strategy but also to what extent the strategy is adopted. Thus, a psychologist's acculturation strategy is influenced by the level and rate of their moral development (Li & Ai, 2020). Ultimately, this may play a role in the perceptions of psychologists towards an ethical code. Perceptions are an overarching construct since it encompasses values and beliefs. Therefore, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of values and beliefs to illuminate psychologists' reasoning regarding how and why compliance with an ethical code may occur, as these aspects may play a role in applying an ethical code. The present study aimed to determine psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code as found in existing research.

## **Methodology**

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For this study, a rapid review was selected to critically review and synthesize the best available research regarding psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code. The fundamental principles of a systematic review were adhered to by a rapid review (Schünemann & Moja, 2015). They included the location, selection, assessment, coding, and synthesizing of data relating to a specific research question whilst aiming to be rigorous and explicit to inform evidence-based practice in a logical manner (Belur et al., 2021). The steps followed for this rapid review will include research question refinement, research protocol development, bias identification, search execution, screening and selection, quality appraisal, coding, and evidence synthesis (Haby et al., 2016).

The rapid review methodology seemed suitable, and the literature search and review methods were conducted systematically and explicitly, which contributed towards the identification, selection, and critical appraisal of relevant studies included in this study.

### ***Search strategy and selection criteria***

An experienced North-West University (NWU) librarian conducted a preliminary scoping search of several NWU online library database catalogues (OneSearch portal). Scoping searches are fundamentally broad and exploratory searches of relevant scientific literature to determine key characteristics of the subject (Morris et al., 2016). Following a scoping search, the researchers obtained a more holistic understanding of the topic being reviewed, which helped clarify the review question. The selected database was EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS), accessed through the North-West University databases, as a rapid review utilizes a few or a single database to conduct the study (Marshall et al., 2019). Boolean configuration was incorporated to limit searches and specify search parameters (Boland & Dickson, 2017). The search strategy included a combination of the following keywords: ("Perceptions" OR "attitudes" OR "opinion" OR "experience" OR "view" OR "reflections" OR "beliefs" OR "values") AND ("Psychologist") AND ("Ethics" OR "Ethical code" OR

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“Code of Ethics”). Additional electronic databases were searched for this review, but no additional sources were found.

### ***Inclusion and exclusion criteria***

The search strategy included full-text journal studies, peer-reviewed journals, qualitative studies, quantitative studies, and review studies. The search was limited to studies published in English, published between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2020, as there is an identifiable gap in the literature regarding ethics research in professional psychology from the year 2000. Therefore, this timeline has been selected.

### ***Selection of studies***

The titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria (Haby et al., 2016). After that, the complete texts were screened to establish their suitability for the review (Haby et al., 2016). Literature was excluded based on the irrelevance or failure to relate, describe, and document the key elements related to the psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code. Similar to a systematic review, rapid reviews are conducted in a systematic, closely documented search and screening process informed by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses-Rapid Reviews (PRISMA-RR) guidelines (Stevens et al., 2018). Presented in Figure 1, it provides a comprehensive standardized approach to reporting how many studies were identified for inclusion in the review and illustrated the progression of the review (Boland & Dickson, 2017). The initial search yielded 79 results. After duplicates were removed, 63 sources remained. The remaining 63 sources were screened for relevance. After the rigorous quality appraisal, only four sources remained as they accurately captured the key elements, experiences, and opinions of psychologists towards an ethical code.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

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### ***Appraisal process***

The process of quality appraisal was conducted following the guidelines of a rapid review (Haby et al., 2016). The quality of the selected documents affects the result of the research, which was an important factor to consider when ensuring the reliability and quality of the study. The process of assessing the quality of study methods in order to determine if findings are reliable and significant is known as a critical appraisal (Dobbins, 2017). The appraisal instrument has been adapted by using various standardized appraisal instruments. The adapted appraisal instrument consisted of the following questions: Is there a clear problem statement? Is there a clear research question? Are the aims and objectives clear? Does the study have a clear and valid research methodology? Are the study results indicated, reported, and discussed (tables, figures, themes etc.)? Is there a clear conclusion for the study?

The researchers independently appraised the four relevant articles. There was no disagreement among the two reviewers, thus it did not require a third party to reach a consensus. Only sufficiently qualified articles were incorporated into the analysis.

### ***Data extraction***

Obtaining information about the included studies related to each study's characteristics is the aim of the data extraction, and occur between identifying eligible studies and analysing the data (Taylor et al., 2021). The phase in which data extraction transpires, the main findings and the results of the included scientific literature were summarized. A data extraction table (Table 1) was created to include the following characteristics: title, authors and publication date, type of publication, country of publication and focus of article/document. Table 2 provides a summary of the main findings of the included studies.

[Insert Table 1 here]

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[Insert Table 2 here]

### ***Data analysis and Data Synthesis***

The determination of what currently exists within scientific literature is the purpose of the data synthesis (Dobbins, 2017). Following the steps put forth in Braun and Clarke (2020), a qualitative analysis occurred of the scientific literature relevant to this study. The steps in Braun and Clarke (2020) consists of a six-phase process for data engagement, coding, and theme development. The most recent articulation of the six-phase process, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2020), includes 1) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and 6) writing the report.

In the steps followed, familiarization with the data was completed through attentive reading of the articles. Initial coding was done according to distinct aspects or features (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Thereafter, the potential themes were identified. In presenting the identified themes, extract examples were provided as a supportive basis. Clarke and Braun (2013) clarified the importance of the researchers linking the analysis back to the research question and the literature review to determine the relevance and accuracy of the thematic analysis.

### ***Ethical consideration***

The study was approved as a no-risk study by the North-West University's Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) with approval number NWU-00426-20-A1. It remains the researchers' responsibility to ensure that reasonable, unbiased, and accurate information is synthesized and reported. Transparency within the research process was ensured and the process strictly adhered to the research protocol, enabling researchers to replicate or verify the

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findings, a vital requirement of a systematic review. A pre-established protocol was used to minimize bias in this process of developing an inclusion and exclusion criteria.

### ***Results***

It is a concern that only four articles were identified from the search period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020 regarding psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code since attitudes and perceptions essentially form the foundation of ethical decisions and ethical behaviours. The four identified articles included: Ships in the rising sea? Changes over time in psychologists' ethical beliefs and behaviors (Schwartz-Mette & Shen-Miller, 2017); Psychologists' perceptions of ethically troubling incidents across international borders (Pettifor & Sawchuk, 2006); An exploratory study: Perceptions of ethical behaviors among psychologists (Conley, 2013); The subjective experience of a group of South African psychologists regarding the HPCSA and the ethical code (Van der Merwe, 2010).

Four superordinate themes with associated subthemes were extracted from the literature analysis elucidating the perceptions of psychologists towards an ethical code, namely (1) Ethical codes perceived as ambiguous; (2) Perception of an ethical code as challenging and frustrating; (3) Perception that beliefs influence the interpretation of an ethical code; and (4) Perception that professional and contextual characteristics influence ethical behaviour. A summary of the themes and subthemes is presented in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

#### **Theme 1: Ethical codes perceived as ambiguous**

The superordinate theme of ethical codes perceived as ambiguous provided three subthemes:

(1) The existence of various versions; (2) An ethical code is not prescriptive; and (3)

Difficulty in understanding an ethical code.

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### *Subtheme 1: The existence of various versions*

In the first subtheme relating to the fact that different practitioners were educated according to different versions of an ethical code, Schwartz-Mette and Shen-Miller (2018) found that professionals at various career stages may differ significantly on ethical matters. It appears that differences were rooted in different ethical training systems. Pettifor and Sawchuk (2006) found that a significant reason for countries to revise their ethical code was to ensure relevance and support for members. Unfortunately, according to Pettifor and Sawchuk (2006), revisions were done without collecting information regarding the extent or nature of members' professional ethics training. As Conley (2013) concluded, the existence of various ethical codes and established guidelines can cause uncertainties in psychologists' ethical behaviour.

### *Subtheme 2: An ethical code is not prescriptive*

In the second subtheme, concerns emerged regarding practitioners' views towards an ethical code. Van der Merwe (2010) found that psychologists view an ethical code as arduous rather than user-friendly. Pettifor and Sawchuk (2006) identified a need for education in ethics and more specific guidelines in terms of ethical codes. Additionally, in exploring the perceptions and attitudes of the practitioners regarding ethics, Van der Merwe (2010) found that psychologists are divided about their satisfaction with an ethical code. A need for alternative means of support was indicated. Van der Merwe (2010) also found a lack of engagement with an ethical code brought about by contrasting opinions of a code of conduct.

### *Subtheme 3: Difficulty in understanding an ethical code*

Van der Merwe (2010) found that practitioners are divided on whether the ethical code is easy to interpret or not. According to Van der Merwe (2010), a similar trend is observed in the responses to whether an ethical code is realistic and practical, on which most practitioners

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agree. This observation is supported by Conley (2013), as findings indicated that behaviours that presented the most challenges to psychologists were clearly articulated. However, the application of the expected behaviour was unclear. According to the research conducted by Schwartz-Mette and Shen-Miller (2017), an ethical code is aspirational and written broadly to allow interpretation across multiple professional and work contexts that elaborate on the notion that the practitioners' understanding of an ethical code will influence their interpretation thereof. Despite all the frustration that psychologists report, they still support the notion of a statutory regulatory body that prescribes ethical behaviour, as found in research by Van der Merwe (2010).

## **Theme 2: Perception of an ethical code as challenging and frustrating**

The second superordinate theme emerging from the perception that an ethical code is challenging and frustrating yielded three subthemes, namely, (1) Discrepancies and multiple explanations; (2) Lack of practitioner consensus; and (3) Practitioners feel that their needs are not being met.

### *Subtheme 1: Discrepancies and multiple explanations*

There is every indication in the literature that discrepancy exists both within ethical codes and between ethical codes and the countries' law. Even though established ethical guidelines and rules exist, Conley (2013) points to prevailing uncertainty and controversy, specifically, the ethical versus unethical controversy and the level of agreement on ethical codes.

Additionally, Schwartz-Mette and Shen-Miller (2017) found that the existence of multiple explanations may lead to justification for unethical psychologists' behaviours, namely, disagreement, lack of knowledge, lack of clarity, or knowingly engaging in unethical behaviour.

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*Subtheme 2: Lack of practitioner consensus*

Practitioners have different ideas about interpreting the principles of an ethical code. Each practitioner also has their own explanation of what is ethical and to what extent when following a specific course of action. Conley (2013) found an equal split between the practitioners on behaviours that were ethical and unethical. Schwartz-Mette and Shen-Miller (2017) underwrite this view by identifying a lack of practitioner consensus on the ethicality of some behaviours since there might be a possibility that some practitioners condone behaviours currently identified as unethical.

*Subtheme 3: Practitioners feel that their needs are not being met.*

On the third subtheme – concerns about practitioners feeling that their needs are unmet – Van der Merwe (2010) found that an ethical code addresses contemporary issues and challenges in the psychological profession as reflected in more than half of practitioners' beliefs. Other practitioners not sharing this opinion may indicate that some participants feel that their needs are not being met. It is concerning that Van der Merwe (2010) found that half of the practitioners claim to have average knowledge of an ethical code, thus suggesting that numerous psychologists admitted to having insufficient knowledge of an ethical code. A finding of inadequate knowledge is unsettling since psychologists do not only rely on the knowledge of an ethical code but are also informed by other resources such as local laws and regulations to assist in the development of ethical dilemma solutions (Conley, 2013).

**Theme 3: Perception that beliefs influence the interpretation of an ethical code.**

The superordinate theme of the perception that beliefs influence the interpretation of an ethical code rendered three subthemes: (1) Personal and professional values collide; and (2) Strength of beliefs influence the interpretation of an ethical code.

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### *Subtheme 1: Personal and professional values collide*

The personal values of the practitioner continue to play a role in their professional lives, thus guiding the implementation of an ethical code and ultimately influencing their decision towards what is ethical and what not. Personal values are not always indicative of established principles as adopted by an ethical code. According to Conley (2013), there are times when the local laws and ethics for psychologists collide. Ethical dilemmas may arise when ethical standards and principles compete when conflict arises between personal and professional roles or when ethical codes are in contrast with the established law of the country. Pettifor and Sawchuk (2006) elaborate by stating that practitioners could encounter ethical dilemmas due to their secular and religious beliefs.

### *Subtheme 2: Strength of beliefs influence the perception of an ethical code.*

The topic that the strength of a practitioner's belief might influence the interpretation of an ethical code emerged from the second subtheme. Beliefs guide the extent to which the practitioner will follow and interpret an ethical code and influence the belief about whether the ethical code's ability and intention can be applied during an ethical dilemma. Pettifor and Sawchuk (2006) found that moral principles in professional ethical codes reflect either explicitly or implicitly the values of the cultures in which they are created. They also reflect the conditions in which professionals work. Additionally, Conley (2013) mentions that cultural, environmental, and personal values and beliefs can interfere with applying professional ethical codes when ethical dilemmas occur. Inherently, a practitioner's perception of an ethical code will influence their interpretation of an ethical code and ultimately guide their decision and behaviour.

## **Theme 4: Perception that professional and contextual characteristics influence ethical behavior**

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The superordinate theme of the perception that professional and contextual characteristics influences ethical behaviour rendered three subthemes: (1) Ethicality is not determined by age or level of education; (2) Professional growth and continued education and; (3) Cognizance of ethical codes being context-specific.

### *Subtheme 1: Ethicality is not determined by age or level of education*

In the first subtheme, it became clear that although professional experience is beneficial when encountering an ethical dilemma, chances are the practitioner encountered a similar dilemma before compared to a novice practitioner; however, this is not the deciding factor of an ethical outcome. The deciding factor will be determined by the level of ethics training of each practitioner. Conley (2013) agrees by stating that training in ethics must take place, despite the level of education, as this will ensure psychologists and graduate-level students understand the application of an ethical code in a relevant context since the level of education did not emerge with more significant findings on the ethical dilemmas. According to Schwartz-Mette and Shen-Miller (2017), ethical knowledge does not lead to ethical behaviour.

### *Subtheme 2: Professional growth and continued education*

From the literature, subtheme 2 emerged, making it clear that continuous training throughout one's career is needed to maintain a certain level of ethicality to maintain and better the practitioners' ethical skills and abilities throughout the various stages of their career careers. Conley (2013) found that ethical dilemmas will continue to pose challenges for psychologists. Therefore, efforts should be made using ethics training to ensure that psychologists can comfortably understand an ethical code. Additionally, Schwartz-Mette and Shen-Miller (2017) argue that self-assessment may deepen a practitioner's ethical competence. The concept of self-assessment includes reflection and mindfulness to deepen the sense of self-

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awareness in a psychologist and ultimately enhance ethical competence. Conley (2013) concurs with this argument as her findings indicate that ethical awareness is crucial for applying professional ethics. In essence, the level of ethical awareness is ultimately a determining factor in the degree to which a practitioner behaves ethically.

### *Subtheme 3: Cognizance of ethical codes being context-specific*

Certain aspects of the practitioner, such as the culture of origin, will influence the ethical behaviour of the practitioner. Pettifor and Sawchuk (2006) argue that a worldview in contrast with the culture, religion, law, and politics of many other countries is that of Western societies in which science is valued as the source of knowledge and individual rights in a secular and democratic society is of prime importance. Thus, ethical codes, ethics training, values, and beliefs of both practitioner and client are context-specific. Schwartz-Mette and Shen-Miller (2017) note that cultural factors and understanding the context should be considered in the quest for ethical practice and the development of ethical codes.

## **Discussion**

The first significant study regarding psychologists' beliefs about and compliance with ethical principles, namely Ethics of practice: The beliefs and behaviors of psychologists as therapists (Pope et al., 1987), were conducted in the USA. After that, disparate studies followed in a variety of countries with researchers examining the degree to which psychologists perceived a specific behaviour as ethical or unethical, including Australia (Sullivan, 2002), the Caribbean (Conley, 2013), and Italy (Gius & Coin, 2000). Nevertheless, the study conducted by Pope et al. in 1987 remains the most notable since it attempts to examine psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code. However, in the last twenty years, only four relevant articles were identified that considered psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code. Previous and current research emphasises the significance of ambiguity, discrepancies, and contrariety

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present in ethical codes (O'Donohue, 2020). Nevertheless, limited studies explore the influence of personal factors such as values and beliefs on psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code (Jenkin et al., 2021).

The results of this study illuminated psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code. Notably, results foregrounded the perception of ethical codes as ambiguous, challenging, and frustrating. Results also indicated that beliefs influence the interpretation of an ethical code and that professional and contextual characteristics may influence ethical behaviour. Literature in this study indicated that the perception whereby ethical codes are interpreted would impact behaviour.

Given that ethical codes reflect the culture where the codes were developed (Schultz et al., 2020), the values and beliefs of practitioners are interconnected with the way moral and ethical behaviours are perceived in professional disciplines. Thus culture is involved in perceptions of what is important in standards of psychological practice (Kuo & Leach, 2017). A crucial concept to arise from this study is the notion that beliefs and values will influence the practitioner's perception of an ethical code, thus influencing how an ethical code is interpreted and ultimately determines the decisions and behaviours of psychologists.

Further clarified by this study is the fact that personal values and beliefs influence an individual's behaviour and attitude, as highlighted by the ethical acculturation model by Handelsman et al. (2005) and the four-stage model of morality by Rest (1984). According to the ethical acculturation model, the selected strategy is indicative of the psychologist's personal values and beliefs. Similarly, the development of morality will also influence the strategy that a psychologist will choose, thus signifying that adhering to an ethical code is not only a cognitive process. At times, personal values and beliefs can conflict with ethical codes' values and principles, resulting in non-compliance with an ethical code due to self-interest, ignorance. Additionally, Knapp et al. (2013) identify non-compliance reasons as intentional

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misunderstandings used to rationalize unethical behaviour. The findings from this study indicate the need to consider individual and personal qualities that influence perceptions towards ethical codes as this will impact the interpretation and application of an ethical code.

Therefore, this study follows and supports the argument of Dahnke (2015) that ethical behaviour involves more than cultural consideration, codes of ethics or reasoning, but rather includes personal qualities such as devotion towards becoming an ethical psychologist. Consideration of personal qualities regarding ethical matters emphasises the significant need to research psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code as well as the relationship between psychologists' personal values and the values of the profession of psychology.

### **Conclusion**

This study elucidates the perceptions of psychologists towards an ethical code. Limitations are linked with the limited available literature and signify the necessity of more research. Nevertheless, the research aim was to synthesize the available literature. The dearth of literature and concurring themes obtained in this study suggests that there has been insufficient attention given to the perceptions, beliefs, and values and the impact thereof on interpreting an ethical code. Most psychologists will relate to the complexity of applying an ethical code while experiencing an ethical dilemma. Therefore, it is vital to consider ways to enhance understanding and compliance with the code of ethics to utilise its potential to enhance successful ethics training, the possibility of understanding and, ultimately, preventing ethical transgressions.

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## **SECTION 3: CRITICAL REFLECTION**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The final section of the study entails a critical reflection regarding the core components constituting this study. This section comprises of a brief overview of the conception and aim of this study, including an epilogue on the research process, findings, significance, limitations and recommendations.

### **3.2 Conception of the study**

Tjeltveit (1999) states that the existence of ethical codes does not equal ethics. Considering the ethical challenges that continue to exasperate the profession of psychology in current societies, this statement remains a valid argument relevant in this day and age.

The concern is raised that the typical emphasis on rules, knowledge, understanding, and application of the profession's ethical principles and values to ethical problems, although important and valuable, may not be enough (Korkut & Sinclair, 2020).

Keeping in mind the idiosyncratic nature of the topic, pursuing a purposeful contribution toward the profession must culminate in a dynamised body of knowledge to inform and enhance existing scientific understanding of ethical matters in the psychology practice.

The following research question thus arose: What is psychologists' perceptions as found in the literature regarding ethics and an ethical code?

### **3.3 Research aim**

The proposed study aimed to identify and appreciate psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code from the available literature.

### **3.4 Epilogue**

#### **3.4.1 Research process**

Rapid reviews can overcome a key barrier, such as the lack of timely and relevant research considering the lack of research in general regarding an ethical code. Moreover, a significant need exists in psychology to synthesise a more substantial body of knowledge regarding ethical codes. Therefore, a rapid review methodology was used to explore and illuminate relevant articles on the perceptions, including beliefs, attitudes, and values of psychologists towards an ethical code.

A thorough literature search was conducted in collaboration with an experienced NWU librarian in executing this rapid review study. The literature search employed the North-West University's (NWU) database, the EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) search portal. Secondly, the familiarization of literature regarding ethics in psychology commenced, whereafter the conceptualisation and drafting of a first proposal followed. Revision of the first proposal was conducted to ensure all scientific writing standards were adhered to before presenting to the internal scientific small group in April 2020. After that, the proposal was submitted to the Community Psychological Research (COMPRES) group for evaluation and revision. Having made the changes as suggested by COMPRES, approval for the study was obtained on 27 July 2020. Lastly, the study was reviewed by the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) on 7 August 2020, whereafter it was cleared and initiated with an ethics number.

The retrieved studies were then screened for their relevance to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, including full-text journal studies, qualitative studies, quantitative studies, and review studies. The search was limited to studies published in English published between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2020. An identifiable gap in the literature is evident regarding ethics research in professional psychology from 2000; therefore, this timeline has been selected. The

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initial search yielded 79 results. After duplicates were removed, 63 sources remained. The remaining 63 sources were screened for relevance. After the rigorous quality appraisal, only four sources remained as they accurately captured the key elements, experiences, and opinions of psychologists towards an ethical code. The articles found relevant to this study were qualitatively analysed according to the process of thematic analysis as explicated by Braun and Clarke (2020), as a six-phase process for data engagement, coding and theme development.

### **3.4.2 Findings of the study**

The findings of this study were encapsulated by four comprehensively descriptive superordinate themes and subthemes:

**Theme 1: Ethical codes perceived as ambiguous (Subthemes: (1) The existence of various versions; (2) An ethical code is not prescriptive; and (3) Difficulty in understanding an ethical code)**

The first main theme to emerge denoted the confusion and hesitancy associated with ethical codes in general because various versions of the ethical codes exist whilst being perceived as not prescriptive and difficult to understand. Ethical codes for psychologists are updated and changed regularly, and although an ethical code provides guidelines for the profession, it is by no means a prescriptive document for the practitioner to follow step by step to behave ethically. In essence, the practitioner relies on their level of interpretation to correctly implement an ethical code. Thus, resulting in the opinion that ethical codes are difficult to understand, and not merely enough, since it is only intended to serve as a reference guide for ethical behaviour.

**Theme 2: Perception of an ethical code as challenging and frustrating (Subthemes: (1) Discrepancies and multiple explanations; (2) Lack of practitioner**

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**consensus; and (3) Practitioners feel that their needs are not being met.)**

Secondly, emerging from the literature synthesis was the uncertainty, indecision and hesitancy associated with an ethical code. Specifically, an ethical code is perceived as incompetent in providing sufficient explanations, guidelines, and examples, eliciting negative emotions associated with an ethical code. Since an ethical code is perceived as having the inability to satisfy the desired needs due to consensus, a divide occurs between practitioners. The one group tries to follow the code of ethics completely, and the other group do what they think an ethical code wants them to do. Both groups are influenced by the fact that their code of ethics is confusing to them.

**Theme 3: Perception that beliefs influence the interpretation of an ethical code (Subthemes: (1) Personal and professional values collide; and (2) Strength of beliefs influence the interpretation of an ethical code.)**

The third theme that emerged during the thematic analysis of the data set the individualistic, personal, and intrapersonal factors present in all individuals and the influence these factors might have on the perception or interpretation of an ethical code and ultimately manifesting through behaviour. Thus, personal values, experiences and beliefs continue to play a role in professional lives and thus guide the implementation of an ethical code and ultimately the decision towards what is ethical and what not.

**Theme 4: Perception that professional and contextual characteristics influence ethical behavior (Subthemes: (1) Ethicality is not determined by age or level of education; (2) Professional growth and continued education and (3) Cognizance of an ethical code being context-specific.**

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The final theme that emerged related to professional experience is beneficial when encountering an ethical dilemma. Chances are the practitioner encountered a similar dilemma before compared to a novice practitioner. However, this is not the deciding factor of an ethical outcome. The level of ethics training will determine the deciding factor each practitioner has received. However, continuous training throughout one's career is needed to maintain a certain level of ethicality. The level of ethical awareness is ultimately a determining factor in how a practitioner behaves ethically. Additionally, certain aspects of the practitioner, such as the culture of origin, will influence the ethical behaviour of the practitioner. Other elements include the country of origin, the state in which they are practising, and where and in which year they received training in a specific version of an ethical code.

The findings of this study, essentially, are based on empirical evidence rather than speculation or theory. Therefore, I declare that this study's aim, namely to identify and understand the perceptions of psychologists as found in available literature regarding an ethical code, has been met.

### **3.4.3 Limitations**

Despite the achievement of the study aim, various limitations of this study are evident and should be considered:

- This review focused specifically on psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code, although research regarding ethics in the field of psychology have been researched extensively, relevant and updated research are scarce.
- As a rapid review study, research conducted are limited in comprehensiveness and coverage, as it was constrained to specific terms.

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- The four articles identified and included in this review, represents a small amount of literature although appropriate and valuable, limits generalising the findings drawn from them.

### **3.4.4 Recommendations**

This rapid review study not only irradiates the relevance of ethics studies in the profession of psychology but also demonstrates the need for further research regarding psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code in an attempt to enhance insight into ethical decision making, ethics training and revisions of ethical codes. The following is recommended:

- The lack of studies exploring psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code indicates that more research is required.
- Future studies about the concept of ethics in psychology should include individualistic personal factors of practitioners that may impact the perception or interpretation of an ethical code.
- It is crucial to the profession of psychology that research continues to be conducted on the topic of ethics as the world and all that it encapsulates are subject to continuous change, adversity and adaptation.

### **3.4.5 Significance of the study**

This study is the tip of the iceberg; however, it is considered to be significant since it illuminates the apparent deficit in ethics research:

- This study can impact the direction of future research by bringing awareness to multiple interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that may play a role in implementing an ethical code.

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- The findings of this study could assist in successful ethical training and enhance the understanding and possible prevention of ethical transgressions.

### **3.5 Critical reflection**

This investigation aimed to clarify and synthesize available research to determine how psychologists perceive ethical codes. Initially, while still trying to clarify the concept of ethics and its interrelatedness with psychology, a value-adding possibility came to mind: The profession of psychology must be regarded as a privileged profession.

While the reality remains that psychology is a science – an objective, logical study of the material world based on fact – psychology encapsulates a human component. At its core, the profession is built on the complexity, contradictions, and mystery of human life. The psychologist has the privilege to deal with another human being's deepest, most private, and coveted parts of the self. In essence, psychologists are entrusted with a priceless gift, the privilege to deal with the human psyche. It is a responsibility that must not be taken lightly, and every effort to protect this privilege and the impact thereof must be researched, applied, and taken seriously.

For professional conduct to foster integrity, honour, and righteousness, psychology draws upon the fidelity of ethics and the dependability of morals to guide the profession. In the world of ethics, everything is concrete, black and white, and decided. In contrast, the moral compass is elusive, slippery, and distinctive to each psychologist.

A practical measure, such as an ethical code, attempts to unite practitioners and the intricate factors professional practice demands. The world of psychology is filled with grey areas, abstractness, uncertainty, and the idiosyncratic component of being humane.

Therefore, a precise, accurate, or specific guideline and ethical code with the single goal of directing psychologists' professional behaviour are still beyond our reach. Regardless, the intention, goals, conduct, and care with which psychologists perform their duties, must

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remain pure, virtuous, moral, and ethical. This revelation became a personal quest to discover the meaning of ethics in everyday life and grounded this study.

In pursuit of becoming a psychologist, the experience of completing this Master's degree opened up a whole dimension of personal possibilities for growth and adventure. However, the most important realization was that being a professional psychologist is a privilege. This study is regarded as the starting point of a future study focused on psychologists' perceptions towards an ethical code, specifically in the South African context.

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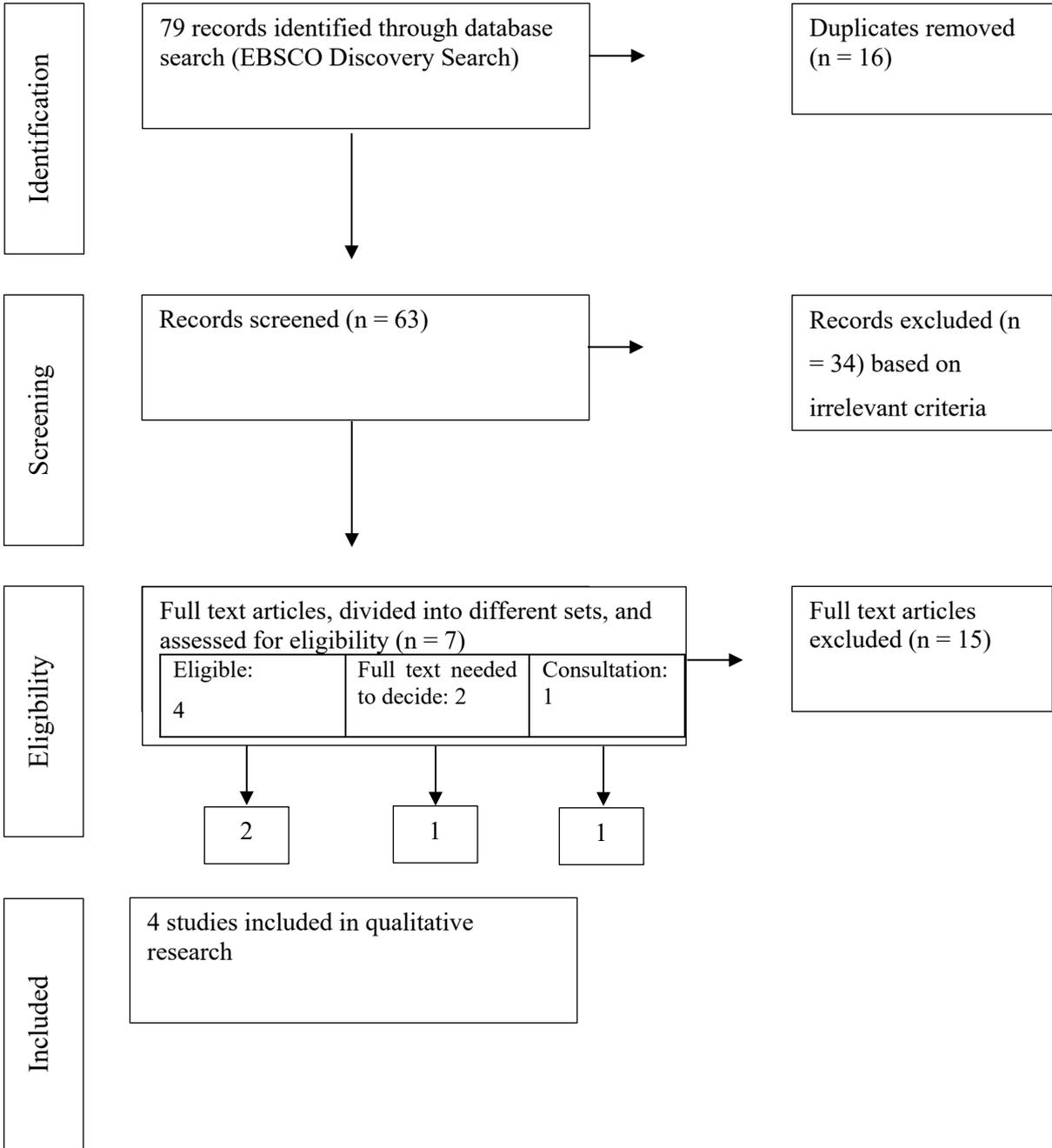
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# ANNEXURES

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram



Psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code

Table 1

*Data extraction table*

Author	Title of article	Journal	Sample size	Research design	Country
Schwartz-Mette, R. A., & Shen-Miller, D. S. (2017)	Ships in the rising sea? Changes Over Time in Psychologists' Ethical Beliefs and Behaviors	Ethics & Behavior, 28(3), 176–198.	325 participants	Quantitative Study	America
Pettifor, J. L., & Sawchuk, T. R. (2006)	Psychologists' perceptions of ethically troubling incidents across international borders	International Journal of Psychology, 41(3), 216–225.	2698 respondents	Qualitative Study	Canada
Conley, J. A. (2013).	An Exploratory Study: Perceptions of Ethical Behaviors Among Psychologists Practicing in the Caribbean.	Ethics & Behavior, 23(5), 396–409.	44 respondents	N/A	Caribbean
Van der Merwe, S. (2010).	The subjective experience of a group of South African psychologists regarding the HPCSA and the ethical code	Grey literature (Master's dissertation)	7 participants 74 respondents	Mixed method	South Africa

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Table 2

*Summary of the main findings of the included studies*

Author	Title of article	Main findings	Author conclusion
Schwartz-Mette & Shen-Miller (2017)	Ships in the Rising Sea? Changes Over Time in Psychologists' Ethical Beliefs and Behaviors	The study examined group differences, consistency in frequency and ethicality ratings, and comparisons with past data. Includes new data and analyses regarding psychologist's engagement in and beliefs about ethical behaviour. Associations as well as changes between beliefs and behaviour were reported.	Re-evaluate ethics education to determine whether the Code of Ethics impact ethical behavior. Recommend replication and continued examination of findings as the most comprehensive research is 30 years old
Pettifor & Sawchuk (2006)	Psychologists' perceptions of ethically troubling incidents across international borders	The Pope and Vetter (1992) model were used to ask psychologists for an ethically troubling incident encountered over the previous year. Results revealed that issues of confidentiality followed by dual relationships were the most frequent. There was considerable agreement on the nature of ethical dilemmas in the countries represented.	The studies were useful in addressing issues within each of the responding countries and identifying similarities across them. Further studies across national boundaries could shed light on the moral foundation of professional codes of ethics, ethically troubling dilemmas, and psychologists' decision-making process in choosing an ethical course of action.
Conley (2013)	An Exploratory study: Perceptions of Ethical Behaviors Among Psychologists Practicing in the Caribbean.	This exploratory study aimed to learn about perceptions regarding ethical behaviors that create ethical dilemmas and the level of agreement to their responses and to identify how demographic variables influenced their perceptions of expected ethical behaviors.	Efforts should be made to ensure ethical training and comfortability with the code of ethics especially when dilemmas arise from cultural variations
Van der Merwe, S. (2010)	The subjective experience of a group of South African psychologists regarding the HPCSA and the ethical code	Psychologists indicated a need to seek alternative means of support or reliance on each other, since there exists a lack of support from both the HPCSA and the code of ethics.	The need for sufficient knowledge to provide psychologists with concrete solutions, were identified.

## Psychologists' perceptions of an ethical code

Table 3

*Summary of the themes and subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1 Ethical codes perceived as ambiguous	(1) The existence of various versions (2) An ethical code is not prescriptive (3) Difficulty in understanding an ethical code
Theme 2 Perception of an ethical code as challenging and frustrating	(1) Discrepancies and multiple explanations (2) Lack of practitioner consensus (3) Practitioners feel that their needs are not being met.
Theme 3 Perception that beliefs influence interpretation an ethical code	(1) Personal and professional values collide (2) Strength of beliefs influence interpretation of an ethical code.
Theme 4 Perception that professional and contextual characteristics influence ethical behaviour	(1) Ethicality is not determined by age or level of education (2) Professional growth and continued education (3) Cognizance of an ethical code being context-specific.