

Chapter 14

ETHICS PLACEBOS, RATIONALIZATIONS, AND EXCUSES

*E*thics placebos (Pope, 2015b, 2017) are what we all tend to reach for when we need fast, effective relief from the heartburn of an upsetting ethical challenge. Part of us *wants* to do the right thing. But another path looks so much safer, easier, simpler, quicker, more popular, more profitable, or more fun. Ethics placebos switch the process from finding and taking the most ethical path to finding ways to justify what we *want* to do.

Sometimes we may reach for industrial-strength ethics placebos, but usually we can find a way to do what we want to do by turning down the volume on our conscience and dulling our ethical awareness. The most common ethics placebos can spin the most shady behaviors into seemingly ethical ideals while giving us an excuse to indulge in unethical or at least questionable behavior. Nonetheless, it is important to constantly remind ourselves of the responsibility and trust that communities, individuals, and the public have put in us. In return, we have a responsibility to do what is best for our clients and not just what is easier, simpler, more popular, or what fits our personal needs, schedule, and individual preferences.

We restate a major theme of this book: We believe that the overwhelming majority of psychologists are conscientious, caring and responsible people who are committed to ethical behavior. However, we also know that none of us is infallible and that all of us, at one time or another, have been tempted to reach for at least a few of these ethics placebos and might be able extend the list of brands.

In this chapter we provide you with a list of 30 excuses that clinicians may make to justify unethical behavior. Many of the false justifications which we present below, appeared in previous editions of this book, and some were added when the list appeared in the volume, *What Therapists Don't Tell About and Why: Understanding Taboos That Hurt Us and Our Clients* (Pope-Sonne et al., 2006).

1. It's not unethical as long as a hospital administrator or insurance case reviewer required or suggested it.
2. It's not unethical if the professional association you belong to allows it.
3. It's not unethical if an ethics code never mentions it.
4. It's not unethical as long as it's not illegal.
5. It's not unethical if we can use the passive voice and look ahead. If someone discovers that our curriculum vitae (CV) is full of degrees we never earned, positions we never held, and awards we never received, all we need to do is say that mistakes were made, they were in the past, and it's time to move on.
6. It's not unethical as long as we can name others who do the same thing.
7. It's not unethical since no one else is perfect. Hey, everyone makes mistakes! So I'm sorry I borrowed your laptop with all your dissertation data and clinical notes on it and it got stolen out of my car, but it could happen to anyone, no one's perfect, so don't make a big deal out of it. Just file a claim with your insurance company and, hey, you'll even get a new one! Wouldn't that be great! Want to get a brewski?
8. It's not unethical as long as we didn't intend to hurt anyone.
9. It's not unethical even if we hurt someone as long as the person we harmed had it coming, provoked us, deserved it, was really asking for it, or practically forced us to do it—or, failing that, has not behaved perfectly, is in some way unlikable, or is acting unreasonably.
10. It's not unethical as long as there is no body of universally accepted, methodologically perfect (i.e., without any flaws, weaknesses, or limitations) studies proving—without doubt—that exactly what we did was the necessary and sufficient proximate cause of harm to the client and that the client would otherwise be free of all physical and psychological problems, difficulties, weaknesses, or challenges. This view was succinctly stated by a member of the Texas pesticide regulatory board charged with protecting Texas citizens against undue risks from pesticides. In discussing Chlordane, a chemical used to kill termites, one member said, "Sure, it's going to kill a lot of people, but they may be dying of something else anyway" ("Perspectives," 1990, p. 17).
11. It's not unethical if we could not (or did not) anticipate the unintended consequences of our acts.

12. It is not unethical as long as my behavior is consistent with my personal values.
13. It is not unethical as long as my client consented to it, or requested it...
14. It's not unethical if we see it in the context of everything the person ever did—in which case, it is only a drop in the bucket. For example, it may seem as if a therapist who has submitted hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of bogus insurance claims for patients he never saw might have behaved "unethically." However, as attorneys and others representing such professionals often point out: It was completely inconsistent with the high ethics manifest in every other part of the person's life (that we know about), and insignificant in the context of the unbelievable good that this person has done and continues to do.
15. It is not unethical as long as I can describe how what I did is consistent with my theoretical orientation.
16. It's not unethical if we can say any of the following about it (feel free to extend the list):
 - a. "What else could I do?"
 - b. "Anyone else would've done the same thing."
 - c. "It came from the heart."
 - d. "I listened to my soul."
 - e. "I went with my gut."
 - f. "It was the smart thing to do."
 - g. "It was just plain common sense."
 - h. "I just knew that's what the client needed."
 - i. "Look, I was just stuck between a rock and a hard place."
 - j. "I'd do the same thing again if I had it to do over."
 - k. "It worked before."
 - l. "What's the big deal?"
 - m. "Come on, no one was really hurt."
 - n. "I meant well."
17. It's not unethical if we are known as experts in the area and have written an article, chapter, or book about it.
18. It's not unethical as long as we were under a lot of stress. No fair-minded person would hold us accountable when it is clear that it was the stress we were under—along with all those other factors—was the clear cause of what happened.
19. It's not unethical as long as no one ever complained about it.
20. It's not unethical as long as we know that the people involved in enforcing standards (e.g., licensing boards or administrative law judges) are dishonest, stupid, destructive, and extremist; are unlike us in some significant way; or are conspiring against us.

21. It's not unethical as long as we felt under a lot of pressure to do it from our supervisor, the chair of our training program, or someone else in authority.
22. It's not unethical if we were just following orders.
23. It's not unethical as long as it results in a higher income or more prestige (i.e., is necessary).
24. It's not unethical if we're victims. Claiming tragic victim status is easy: We can always use one of two traditional scapegoats: (1) our anything-goes society, which lacks clear standards and leaves us ethically adrift; or, conversely, (2) our coercive, intolerant society, which tyrannizes us with "political correctness," dumbs us down, and controls us like children. Imagine, for example, we are arrested for speeding while drunk, and the person whose car we hit presses vengeful charges against us. We show ourselves as the real victim by pointing out that some politically correct, self-serving tyrants have hijacked the legal system and unfairly demonized drunk driving. These powerful people of bad character and evil motivation refuse to acknowledge that most speeding while drunk is not only harmless—actuarial studies show that only a small percentage of the instances of drunk speeding actually result in harm to people or property—but also sometimes unavoidable, profoundly ethical, and a social good, getting drivers to their destinations faster and in better spirits. We stress that any studies seeming to show drunk speeding is harmful are not just unscientific (e.g., none randomly assigns drivers to drunk speeding and nondrunk speeding conditions) but hopelessly biased (e.g., focusing on measures of harm but failing to include measures sensitive to the numerous benefits of drunk speeding). This flipping the roles of victim and victimizer can be powerful. Freyd described it as DARVO: Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender, and she and her colleagues have researched it (see, e.g., Freyd, 1997; Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Harsey et al., 2017). The concept has found its way not only into law review journals (e.g., Cantalupo, 2020) and news articles (e.g., de Morales, 2017) but also popular entertainment (e.g., "It's Called DARVO—South Park—Season Finale" 2019). Ta-Nehisi Coates (2010) wrote that "the most potent component of racism is frame-flipping—positioning the bigot as the actual victim. So the gay do not simply want to marry, they want to convert our children into sin. The Jews do not merely want to be left in peace, they actually are plotting world take-over. And the Blacks are not actually victims of American power, but beneficiaries of the war against hard-working whites" (para. 5).
25. It's not unethical as long as there are books, articles, or papers claiming that it is the right thing to do.

26. It's not unethical to engage in, enable, or passively allow racist behavior to happen as long as we can claim that we ourselves are completely colorblind and that we don't even notice race and skin color.
27. It's not unethical as long as it would be very, very hard—almost impossible!—to do things another way.
28. It's not unethical as long as we can find a consultant who says it's okay.
29. It's not unethical as long as we can find an attorney who says it's OK.
30. It's not unethical as long as you had too many other things on your mind to think about it.

Remaining mindfully aware of the ways that each of us may be vulnerable—particularly at times of stress or fatigue, of great temptation, or temporary weakness—to these cognitive strategies may be an important aspect of our ability to respond ethically to difficult, complex, constantly evolving situations, particularly at moments when we are not at our best. Reminding ourselves of our own unique patterns of vulnerability—particularly when we are tired, stressed, or distressed—to reach for these handy ethics placebos may help us to resist temptation and keep searching for the most ethical response to our work's complex, constantly changing challenges.