



**AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION**

# Ethical Considerations for Psychologists when Commenting on Public Figures

APA ETHICS COMMITTEE 2025

## **WHAT IS THE GOLDWATER RULE?**

During Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign against Lyndon Johnson, over 12,000 psychiatrists were asked as part of *Fact Magazine's* survey whether they believed then Senator Goldwater was psychologically fit to serve as President of the United States.<sup>1</sup> The magazine published responses from those surveyed, many of whom questioned - in very negative and harsh terms - the Senator's psychological capacity. Some respondents included specific diagnoses in their answers, ranging from "chronic psychosis" to "paranoid schizophrenic." Of the 2,417 psychiatrists who responded to the survey, 1,189 said Senator Goldwater was unfit for office. After the election, Senator Goldwater successfully sued the magazine, its editor and publisher for Libel.

A vigorous debate ensued about whether a psychiatrist should be able to diagnose or provide an opinion on a current public figure's psychological status without ever having met, tested, or interacted with the person in question. Ultimately, in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association adopted Section 7.3 in their *Principles of Medical Ethics with Annotations Especially Applicable to Psychiatry*, referred to as the Goldwater Rule, which states:

*On occasion psychiatrists are asked for an opinion about an individual who is in the light of public attention or who has disclosed information about himself/herself through public media. In such circumstances, a psychiatrist may share with the public his or her expertise about psychiatric issues in general. However, it is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he or she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorization for such a statement.*

In 2017, the American Psychiatric Association reaffirmed its support of the Goldwater Rule.

## **DOES THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION HAVE A SIMILAR RULE OR ETHICAL GUIDELINE?**

The *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* of the American Psychological Association (APA) (Ethics Code) does not have a standard that specifically addresses rendering an opinion, as defined in the American Psychiatric Association's rule, about "an individual who is in the light of public attention or who has disclosed information about himself/herself through public media." However, the APA has issued a statement, and its Ethics Code makes clear, that "psychologists should [not] offer diagnoses of candidates or any other living public figure they have never examined." "Diagnosis" is defined as the gathering of data through assessment techniques (e.g. tests and examinations) to identify and determine the nature of a disease or disorder and then the classification of individuals on the basis of a disease, disorder or set of characteristics as informed through those various assessment techniques. Further, diagnosing an individual with a personality disorder necessarily includes studying their long-term patterns of behavior and functioning. It must be noted that the APA Ethics Code does not apply only to opinions about those in the public arena; the Ethics Code must be followed regardless of whether the opinion relates to a public figure or private citizen.

Specifically, Standards 2.04 (Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments) and 9.01 (Bases for Assessments) address the basis necessary for a psychologist to render a scientific or professional judgment. Further, in Standard 9.01 there are circumstances in which a psychologist is allowed to provide an opinion when an examination of the individual in question is not practical. In those instances, as addressed in Standards 9.01(b) and 9.01 (c), even when psychologists are providing opinions of psychological characteristics of individuals, psychologists must "clarify the probable impact of their limited information on the reliability and validity of their opinions, and

appropriately limit the nature of their conclusions or recommendations.” In other words, if a psychologist is unable to examine an individual but is, nonetheless, inclined to render a non-diagnostic opinion regarding the individual, the limits of that opinion, including its reliability, must be fully disclosed along with whatever data the psychologist relied upon.

Additional standards that are relevant include Standard 5.04 which provides additional guidance for psychologists who may comment or provide advice through the media, including “print, internet or “other electronic transmission.” That standard requires, in part, that the statements be based on “professional knowledge, training, or experience in accord with appropriate psychological literature and practice,” and be consistent with the Ethics Code. Section 3 of the Ethics Code (Human Relations) should also be referenced when questioning whether sharing an opinion about a public figure is inconsistent with your ethical obligations as a psychologist. Finally, Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence requires psychologists to consider factors, including political factors, that might lead to possible misuse of their influence.

#### **WHAT ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION?**

- Is my right to free speech compromised just because I am a psychologist?
- Am I bound by the APA Ethics Code even in social situations when I am not operating in a professional capacity?
- What about social media?
- What if my comments were never intended to be shared with the public?

Freedom of speech is not absolute. Even with Constitutional protections, there are limitations. Freedom of speech is protected when attempts at its restriction are initiated by the government – not by an individual citizen or private entity. Regardless of who attempts to enact restrictions, speech cannot be libelous or defamatory. Employers, for example, are not free to speak to employees in any manner they wish. Teachers cannot speak to their students in certain ways.

There are ways, however, to share your opinions and thoughts about public figures without violating the spirit of the Ethics Code, and without placing yourself in a potentially libelous situation (discussed below). Be cognizant that in today's world, any comment can go viral through social media and have unintended consequences.

#### **WHAT ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS ABOUT HOW A PSYCHOLOGIST COULD ETHICALLY RESPOND TO A MEDIA INQUIRY WHILE MAINTAINING THE SPIRIT OF THE GOLDWATER RULE?**

If a psychologist is inclined to comment on a public figure, the psychologist must follow the APA Ethics Code. The psychologist should be clear that they cannot provide a diagnosis, have not completed an examination, are able to comment solely based on observed behaviors, and explain the limitations of any observations (section 9.01b and 9.01c). For example, if asked about a popular actor or actress, a psychologist may want to start their comments with, “I have never met or interacted with X and am not in a position to diagnose them, but statements and behaviors I have observed while hearing them speak are consistent with the types of statements and behaviors of someone with a diagnosis of X (or psychological issues of Y). However, this initial impression is based solely on limited subjective data and not a full clinical evaluation. Thus, my opinion should not be overstated or taken out of context.” When asked follow-up questions, such as “Do you think she has Borderline Personality Disorder?”, consider including in your answer phrases like:

- “As I said earlier, I am not able to diagnose someone I’ve never met.”
- “Not only am I unable to diagnose someone I have not personally evaluated, but it is not uncommon for someone to have a public persona that may not be consistent with who that person is in more private settings.”
- “My professional Code of Ethics prohibits me from diagnosing or labeling people I have not personally evaluated.”

A psychologist may also consider educating the questioner as to the definition of a diagnosis and the often-misplaced importance on diagnoses rather than on the behaviors an individual may exhibit. Questions regarding an individual's diagnosis or psychological characteristics are typically raised only after observation of certain behaviors, which may include use of a certain type of language or speech. The absence of a diagnosis does not make certain behaviors any less concerning or dangerous, which may benefit from professional evaluation. At the same time, being diagnosed with a personality disorder does not necessarily mean that the individual exhibits concerning behaviors.

*Note: The 2025 APA Ethics Committee thanks the 2017-2019 APA Ethics Committees for their draft of this FAQ, which was finalized by the 2025 Ethics Committee.*