THE BRITISH PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH

WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS

APRIL 1978

The British Psychological Society
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The following Statement was approved by the British Psychological Society at its Annual General Meeting at York in April, 1978.

Psychologists are committed to increasing the understanding that people have of their own and others' behaviour in the belief that this understanding ameliorates the human condition and enhances human dignity. These ethical values must characterise not only applications of psychological knowledge but also the means of obtaining knowledge. Performing an investigation with human subjects may occasionally require an ethical decision concerning the balance between the interests of the subject and the humane or scientific value of the research.

Psychologists require an atmosphere of free inquiry and communication without misrepresentation of their knowledge and methods by others. Psychologists must match this freedom with ethical concern, competence, objectivity and the non-wasteful use of material resources and human resources. Psychologists have an obligation to prevent misuse through personal influence, public statement and professional sanction. Psychologists can and should promote the public understanding of psychological knowledge in such a way as to prevent its misuse or render misuse ineffective.

The psychologist has a general obligation to make the results of his research available to other psychologists, to related scientists, and to allied professions. No psychologist should seek to restrict the availability or publication of his own or colleagues' research without seeking the opinion of experience and disinterested colleagues. Until such publication has permitted the verification of results and the evaluation of their apparent implications by the scientific community, psychologists have an obligation to resist the premature citation of results in wider discussions on policy, and especially their premature use in policy formulation. This general principle does not prevent a psychologist from undertaking explicitly confidential research on restricted topics (e.g. for commercial development or national security) where that research does not violate these principles.

The following set of ethical principles is issued by the British Psychological Society in the belief that a detailed list of prescribed and proscribed procedures would be impractical. It is the Society's belief that the degree of awareness and responsibility that follows from adherence to this general set of principles will serve to raise standards in psychological science and will safeguard the welfare of human subjects who contribute to it. While it would be appropriate to use this set of principles as an indication of the level of awareness that a psychologist should display, the psychologist's compliance with these principles can only be determined by those of his peers who are experienced with the problems which the principles encompass. Accordingly, the principles should not be used as a substitute for a considered judgement in which a case is examined on its merits in all aspects. The principles place reliance upon the opinion of the psychological community as to the individual investigator's ability to anticipate the ethical issues raised and to assess the extent to which any consequence for the subject may be serious. The opinion of colleagues should also assist the investigator in determining whether the research is justified scientifically or pragmatically.

Scientific justification involves the assessment of both the conceptual importance of the potential results and their usefulness to mankind. Pragmatic justification involves assessing, for example, the likely effects of participants' guesses about the objectives of the research upon public attitudes to psychological inquiry in general and upon local voluntary participation in particular.

1. Whenever possible the investigator should inform the subjects of the objectives, and, eventually, the results of the investigation. Where this is not possible the investigator incurs an obligation to indicate to the subject the general nature of the knowledge achieved by such research and its potential value to people, and to outline the general values accepted by psychologists as listed in the introduction to these principles. The investigator's name, status and employer or affiliation should be declared.

2. In all circumstances the investigator must consider the ethical implications and the psychological consequences for his subjects of the research he is carrying out. The investigator must actively consider, by proper preconsultation, whether local cultural variations, special personality factors in the subjects or variations in his procedure from procedures reported previously may introduce unexpected problems for the subject.

3. An investigator should seek the opinion of experienced and disinterested colleagues whenever his research requires or is likely to involve:

   a) Deception concerning the purpose of the investigation or the subject's role in it.
   b) Deception concerning the basis of subject selection.
   c) Psychological or physiological stress.
   d) Encroachment upon privacy.

4. Deception of subjects, or withholding of relevant information from them, should only occur when the investigator is satisfied that the aims and objects of his research or the welfare of his subjects cannot be achieved by other means. Where deception has been necessary, delegation shall normally follow participation as a matter of course. Where the subject's behaviour makes it appear that revelation could be stressful or, when to reveal the objectives or the basis of subject selection would be distressing, the extent and timing of such revelation should be influenced by the subject's psychological welfare. Where deception has been substantial, the subject should be offered the option of withholding his data, in accordance with the principle of participation by informed consent.

5. In proportion to the risks of stress or encroachment upon privacy the investigator incurs an obligation to emphasize to the subject at the outset his volunteer status and his right to withdraw, irrespective of whether or not payment or other inducement is offered, and to describe precisely the demands of the investigation. Where a situation turns out to be more stressful for an individual subject than anticipated by the investigator or than might be reasonably expected by the subject from his introduction, the investigator has an obligation to stop the investigation and consult an experienced and disinterested colleague before proceeding.

6. In proportion to the risks under 3 (a)–(d) and to the personal nature of the information involved the investigator incurs an obligation to treat data as confidential and to conceal identities when reporting results.

7. Studies on non-volunteers, based upon observation or upon records (whether or not explicitly confidential) must respect the privacy and psychological well-being of the subjects.

8. Investigators have the responsibility to maintain the highest standards of safety in procedure, equipment and premises.

9. Where research involves infants and young children as subjects, consent should be obtained from parents or from those in loco parentis, according to the foregoing principles. In the case of children of appropriate age, the informed consent of subjects themselves should also be obtained in advance. In research involving children caution should be exercised when discussing results of research with parents, teachers or others in loco parentis since evaluative statements may carry unintended weight.

10. If a subject solicits advice concerning educational, personality or behavioural problems extreme caution should be exercised and if the problem is serious the appropriate source of professional advice should be recommended.

11. It is the investigator's responsibility to ensure that research executed by associates, employees or students conforms in detail to the ethical decision taken in the light of the foregoing principles.

12. A psychologist who believes that another psychologist or related investigator may be conducting research not in accordance with the foregoing principles has the obligation to encourage the investigator to re-evaluate the research in their light if necessary consulting a responsible senior colleague as a source of further opinion or influence.