Ethical principles for research with human subjects

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

Psychologists have a general obligation to make the results of their research available to other psychologists, to related scientists, and to allied professions. No psychologist should seek to restrict the availability or publication of his or her own or colleagues' research without seeking the opinion of experienced 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...
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to this general set of principles will serve to raise stan-
dards in psychological science and will safeguard the wel-
fare of human subjects who contribute to it. While it would
be appropriate to use this set of principles as an indica-
tion of the level of awareness that a psychologist should
display, the psychologist's compliance with these principles
can only be determined by those peers who are experienced
with the problems which the principles encompass. Accord-
ingly, 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 an extension
of the individual investigator's ability to anticipate the
ethical issues raised and to assess the extent to which any
consequences for the subject may be serious. The opinion of
colleagues should also assist the investigator in deter-
mining 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 enquiry in general and upon local
voluntary participation in particular.

* 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.

* In all circumstances investigators must consider the
ethical implications and the psychological consequences
for subjects of the research being carried out. Investi-
gators must actively consider, by proper consultation,
whether local cultural variations, special personality
factors in the subjects or variations in procedure from
procedures reported previously may introduce unexpected
problems for the subject.

* An investigator should seek the opinion of experienced
and disinterested colleagues whenever the research re-
quires or is likely to involve: (i) deception concern-
ing the purpose of the investigation or the subject's
role in it; (ii) deception concerning the basis of sub-
ject selection; (iii) psychological or physiological
stress; (iv) encroachment upon privacy. Geographical
and institutional isolation of the investigating psycho-
logist increases rather than decreases the need to seek
colleagues' opinions.