Ethics in Psychology

Ethical concerns have become a major focus in psychology. Chapter 2 discusses ethical issues in research, particularly those dealing with deception and animal research. Certainly ethical concerns encompass more than those two topics.

1. Ask the class to speculate on why the American Psychological Association (APA) has formal, written ethical principles. Can’t psychologists simply be trusted to “do right”? 2. Why are there different principles for research using humans and animals? Should there be? 3.How are the ethical responsibilities of scientists similar to those of laypersons? How are they different? The goals of this discussion are to identify the purpose of and need for ethical guidelines in research and to generalize those notions to everyday life.

Many resources will provide background information for either you or your students. The APA Council of Representatives adopted an Ethics Code in 2002. The “General Principles” (reprinted below) are less specific and much briefer than the Ethical Standards and are intended to be aspirational in nature. The full Ethics Code appeared in the December 2002 issue of *American Psychologist.* Additionally, you can access the ethical principles at *www.apa.org/ethics/.*

***Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence***

Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm. In their professional actions, psychologists seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact professionally and other affected persons, and the welfare of animal subjects of research. When conflicts occur among psychologists’ obligations or concerns, they attempt to resolve these conflicts in a reasonable fashion that avoids or minimizes harm. Because psychologists’ scientific and professional judgments and actions may affect the lives of others, they are alert to and guard against personal, financial, social, organizational, or political factors that might lead to misuse of their influence. Psychologists strive to be aware of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work.

***Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility***

*Psychologists establish relationships of trust with those with whom they work. They are aware of their professional and scientific responsibilities to society and to the specific communities in which they work. Psychologists uphold professional standards of conduct, clarify their professional roles and obligations, accept appropriate responsibility for their behavior, and seek to manage conflicts of interest that could lead to exploitation or harm. Psychologists consult with, refer to, or cooperate with other professionals and institutions to the extent needed to serve the best interests of those with whom they work. They are concerned about the ethical compliance of their colleagues’ scientific and professional conduct. Psychologists strive to contribute a portion of their professional time for little or no compensation or personal advantage.*

***Principle C: Integrity***

*Psychologists seek to promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in the science, teaching, and practice of psychology. In these activities, psychologists do not steal, cheat, or engage in fraud, subterfuge, or intentional misrepresentation of fact. Psychologists strive to keep their promises and to avoid unwise or unclear commitments. In situations in which deception may be ethically justifiable to maximize benefits and minimize harm, psychologists have a serious obligation to consider the need for, the possible consequences of, and their responsibility to correct any resulting mistrust or other harmful effects that arise from the use of such techniques.*

***Principle D: Justice***

*Psychologists recognize that fairness and justice entitle all persons to access to and benefit from the contributions of psychology and to equal quality in the processes, procedures, and services being conducted by psychologists. Psychologists exercise reasonable judgment and take precautions to ensure that their potential biases, the boundaries of their competence, and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices.*

***Principle E: Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity***

*Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination. Psychologists are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision making. Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status and consider these factors when working with members of these groups. Psychologists try to eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on those factors, and they do not knowingly participate in or condone activities of others based upon such prejudices.* (American Psychological Association, 2002, pp. 1060-1073)

In addition, the ethical standards are subdivided into 10 categories:

1. Resolving Ethical Issues

2. Competence

3. Human Relations

4. Privacy and Confidentiality

5. Advertising and Other Public Statements

6. Record Keeping and Fees

7. Education and Training

8. Research and Publication

9. Assessment

10. Therapy

You will note that the emphasis in these principles is on providing psychological services rather than conducting research, but this is also valuable information for students. It is interesting that the discussion of ethics in introductory psychology almost always occurs exclusively in the area of research. This oversight can be remedied by talking about ethics as a topic that applies to all psychologists.

Ethics in Psychological Research with Humans

A portion of Principle 8 of the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists” (see “Lecture/Discussion Topic: Ethics in Psychology”) has been expanded to create a booklet, *Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants,* which is available from the American Psychological Association. Salkind (2003) provided the following synopsis of the guidelines for research with human participants:

*1. When a study is planned, the researcher must be the first and most important judge of its ethical acceptability.*

*2. Participants must be judged to be “at no risk” or “at minimal risk.”*

*3. The researcher is responsible for ensuring ethical practices, including the behavior of assistants, students,*

*employees, collaborators, and anyone else involved in the process.*

*4. A fair and reasonable agreement must be reached between the researcher and the subjects prior to the*

*beginning of research.*

*5. If deception is necessary, the researcher must be sure it is justified and a mechanism must be built in to*

*ensure that subjects are debriefed when the research is concluded.*

*6. Researchers must respect the subject’s choice to withdraw and must not coerce the subject to return to the*

*study.*

*7. Every possible effort should be made to protect participants from physical and psychological harm.*

*8. Once the research is complete, should the participant so indicate, the results should be shared and the*

*participant should be given a chance to clarify any discrepancies she or he might be aware of.*

*9. If the research should result in harm of any kind, the researcher has the responsibility to correct the harm.*

*10. All the information obtained in a research study is confidential.* (pp. 66–67)

American Psychological Association. (2002). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist, 57,* 1060–1073.

Salkind, N. J. (2003). *Exploring research* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Ethics in Psychological Research with Animals

Principle 8.09 of the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists” (see “Lecture/Discussion Topic: Ethics in Psychology”) has been expanded to specifically deal with ethical issues in research with animals in the booklet *Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in the Care and Use of Animals,* available from the American Psychological Association or via the Web (*www.apa.org/science/leadership/care/guidelines.aspx*). Researchers who publish in APA journals must attest to the fact that they followed the guidelines below during their animal research:

• When conducting research with animals, all federal, state, local, and institutional laws should be followed. All researchers working with animals should be familiar with these guidelines.

• Psychologists should ensure that all those working with animals are familiar with the guidelines, that all laws concerning animals are followed, and that a veterinarian conducts twice‑yearly inspections of the facility.

• An animal care and use committee, composed of representatives from the institution and the local community, should review all procedures carried out on animals.

• Animals should be bred for laboratory purposes or purchased from a legal supplier. Animals being transported should be given adequate food, water, ventilation, and space and be subjected to no unnecessary stress.

• Animals should be provided with humane housing and care in the facility. It is the responsibility of the

psychologist and other individuals within the institution to ensure that they do.

• Research with animals should have a clear scientific purpose, which should outweigh any stress or harm to

the animals. Alternatives to animal research should always be considered. Research should not begin before being reviewed by the institution’s animal care and use committee. The psychologist should be diligent throughout the research to ensure the animals’ welfare.

• The species used in research should be appropriate to answer the questions posed. The minimum number of

animals necessary to answer the research question should be used.

• The minimum level of distress necessary to the research should be used. The higher the level of distress, the

greater the burden of responsibility and justification is for the researcher. This guideline is quite broad and

covers such topics as aversive versus appetitive procedures, food or water deprivation, physical restraint, extreme environmental conditions, prey killing, aggressive interactions, deliberate infliction of trauma, paralytic agents, and surgical procedures.

• Field research should disrupt the populations as little as possible. Research with endangered species requires

particular justification.

• The educational use of animals is subject to the same type of guidelines as is research with animals.

• Alternatives to euthanasia should be considered when animals are no longer required for research. If euthanasia is necessary, it should be accomplished as humanely as possible.

Research with animals is a particularly controversial issue at this time, as animal activists have become vocal and even violent. If you check newspapers and newsmagazines for a month or so, you are likely to find stories relevant to this issue that you can bring to class for additional information. The December 26, 1988, issue of *Newsweek* contained a cover story on “The Battle over Animal Rights: A Question of Suffering and Science.” This article raised several issues that could lead to fruitful class discussion (but remember that the numbers provided were from 1988).

For example:

• Although the estimated number of animals used in research per year is at least 17 million, 80% to 90% are

thought to be rats and mice. Does this fact change students’ views about the ethical nature of animal research? Does the external validity of animal research (that is, its generalizability to humans) make a difference?

• What are students’ feelings about wearing fur? This practice has drawn especially sharp attention from animal activists. For example, Bob Barker has criticized the Miss America Pageant for its use of fur. How do students feel about cosmetics companies testing their products on animals, injecting chemicals into their eyes and the like? Neither of these issues actually deal with psychology, but they do raise the ire of animal activists and may explain some of the vehemence directed at behavioral research involving animal subjects.

• Why are animal activists so alarmed about animal research but not about pet care? The *Newsweek* article quoted

the American Humane Association as stating that more than 2000 dogs and 3500 cats are born every hour, compared with 415 babies per hour. Also, in 1987 more than 22 million cats and dogs were taken in by animal shelters, and at least 12 million were destroyed.

• What about the relative value of human life compared to that of animals? The *Newsweek* article contained a

poignant essay by a mother whose daughter has cystic fibrosis: “If you had to choose between saving a very cute dog or my equally cute, blond, brown‑eyed daughter, whose life would you choose? It’s not a difficult choice, is it? My daughter has cystic fibrosis. Her only hope for a normal life is that researchers, some of them using animals, will find a cure. Don’t misunderstand. It’s not that I don’t love animals, it’s just that I love Claire more” (Cowley, 1988, p. 55).

• What about the radical animal activists who have resorted to breaking into laboratories and releasing animals

involved in research? Or to vandalizing such laboratories? Or to planting booby traps or bombs that will injure, maim, or even kill the researchers? Where do the rights of animals and researchers begin and end?

This topic may be emotionally charged. Students may end up on opposite sides of the issue, perhaps with very strong feelings. Be sure to moderate the discussion in such a way that you don’t end up alienating a portion of the class.

Herzog (1991) reviewed two books that deal with the issue of animal consciousness (Radner & Radner, 1989; Rollin, 1989). Herzog believed that “both of these books have a sound message that the research community needs to hear” (p. 8) and pointed out that “similarity in biology and psychology implies similarity of mental experience” (p. 8).

If you are interested in more information concerning the ethical treatment of animals in research, contact Society & Animals Forum (SAF; formerly PSYETA). SAF is concerned with promoting animal welfare within psychology and the community at large. SAF has produced a video “Beyond Violence: The Human-Animal Connection” and has published a book, *Animal Models of Human Psychology: Critique of Science, Ethics and Policy* (Shapiro, 1998). In addition, SAF publishes two journals (*Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* and *Society and Animals*) and publishes a newsletter three times a year (free to members; also on the Web site).