3-4 British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct

The British Psychological Society (BPS), along with psychological societies around the world, has produced ethical guidelines for the conduct of research. Any psychologist who breaks these guidelines is subject to disciplinary action. Box 1 provides an extract adapted from a recent version of these BPS ethical principles for work with human participants. The British Psychological Society and The Experimental Psychology Society have together agreed guidelines for research with animals. It is usual practice now for all psychological research to require ethical approval from an appropriate group.

Box 1: BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct

The British Psychological Society (BPS) introduced an amended version of the Code of Ethics and Conduct on 31 March 2006. Research is one of the areas of psychological work that generates many concerns and complaints to the BPS. These include complaints about psychologists falsifying data, failing to obtain consent, plagiarism or failing to acknowledge another's work or contribution. The principles below are designed to help psychologists avoid problems such as these. They are not all of the principles provided in the much longer BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct, but a subset which highlights the kinds of issues that need to be considered when conducting psychological research. As the full BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct applies to psychology students as well as to professional psychologists, the complete document is available online via the BPS website. This box first summarises the ethical principles on which the code is based, and then focuses particularly on ethical responsibilities to do with research. Please note that while the focus here is on ethical conduct with research participants, the code covers clients who use psychological services as well as research participants and seeks to promote ethical behaviour, attitudes and judgements on the part of psychologists, including psychology students.

The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct is based on four ethical principles, which set out the main responsibilities of psychologists. These are: respect; competence; responsibility and integrity:

1 Ethical principle: respect

Psychologists should ‘respect individual, cultural and role differences, including (but not exclusively) those involving age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, marital or family status and socio-economic status’ (guideline 1.1 (i), page 10 of the Code). Respect also entails treating people fairly, keeping appropriate records, obtaining the consent of research participants and maintaining their confidentiality, including storing information about them in ways that are not likely to lead to accidental disclosure.

2 Ethical principle: competence

Psychologists must recognise the limits of their knowledge, skill, training, education, and experience and work within them. In order to do this, they should develop and maintain a comprehensive awareness of professional ethics, including familiarity with the Code. They should also be able to justify their actions on ethical grounds.

3 Ethical principle: responsibility

Psychologists should avoid harming research participants and should take care to ensure that they themselves come to no harm in conducting their research. They should also avoid personal and professional misconduct that might bring the reputation of the profession (or the university) into disrepute. Psychologists take responsibility not only for their own actions, but also for the maintenance of ethical standards amongst colleagues, students, employees, etc.

4 Ethical principle: integrity

Psychologists should strive to be fair, accurate and honest and maintain integrity in all of their professional dealings. Psychologists should be ‘honest and accurate in representing their professional affiliations and qualifications, including such matters as knowledge, skill, training, education, and experience’ (guideline 4.1 (i), page 20 of the Code).

Protection of research participants

The principles listed next have been selected from the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (as written there or in slightly edited form) and are based on the ethical principles of respect and responsibility. We have organized these into four different sections, each of which relate to the protection of research participants.

Psychologists should:

Recruitment of research participants

- (i) Consider all research from the standpoint of research participants, for the purpose of eliminating potential risks to psychological well-being, physical health, personal values, or dignity (guideline 3.3 (i), page 18 of the Code).
- (ii) Undertake such consideration with due concern for the potential effects of, for example, age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, marital or family status, sexual orientation, seeking consultation as needed from those knowledgeable about such effects (guideline 3.3 (ii), page 18 of the Code).
- (iii) Refrain from using financial compensation or other inducements for research participants to risk harm beyond that which they face in their normal lifestyles (guideline 3.3 (iv), page 18 of the Code).

Informed consent

- (iv) Ensure that research participants, particularly children and vulnerable adults, are given ample opportunity to understand the nature, purpose, and anticipated consequences of research participation, so that they may give informed consent to the extent that their capabilities allow. The consent of those in positions of responsibility for children and vulnerable adults will also have to be sought (guideline 1.3)i), page 12 of the Code).
- (v) Seek to obtain the informed consent of all research participants to whom research participation is offered (guideline 1.3 (ii), page 12 of the Code).
- (vi) Keep adequate records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained (guideline 1.3 (iii), page 12 of the Code).

Participant control over participation

- (vii) Ensure from the first contact that research participants are aware of their right to withdraw from research participation at any time (adapted from guideline 1.4 (ii), page 14 of the Code).
- (viii) Comply with requests by research participants who are withdrawing from research participation that any data by which they might be personally identified, including recordings, be destroyed (guideline 1.4 (iii), page 14 of the Code).
- (ix) Inform research participants from the first contact that they may decline to answer any questions put to them (adapted from guideline 3.3 (vii), page 18 of the Code).
- (x) Exercise particular caution when responding to requests for advice from research participants concerning psychological or other issues. If it seems appropriate, suggest that they seek professional help (adapted from guideline 3.3 (ix), page 19 of the Code).
- (xi) Unless informed consent has been obtained, restrict research based upon observations of public behaviour to those situations in which persons being studied would reasonably expect to be observed by strangers, with reference to local cultural values and to the privacy of persons who, even while in a public space, may believe they are unobserved (guideline 1.3 (ix), page 13 of the Code).

Debriefing of research participants

- (xii) Debrief research participants at the conclusion of their participation, in order to inform them of the nature of the research, to identify any unforeseen harm, discomfort, or misconceptions, and in order to arrange for assistance as needed (guideline 3.4 (i), page 19 of the Code).
- (xiii) Take particular care when discussing outcomes with research participants, as seemingly evaluative statements may carry unintended weight (guideline 3.4 (ii), page 19 of the Code).

Source: adapted from The British Psychological Society, 2006

It is important to note that there are likely to be other codes, statutes and ethical guidelines that are relevant in certain contexts. This may include legislation, university ethical procedures, education authorities and medical boards. It is now common for those working with children to have to obtain CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) clearance.