3.3: From Moral Principles to Ethics Codes

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the history of ethics codes for scientific research with human participants.
2. Summarize the American Psychological Association Ethics Code—especially as it relates to informed consent, deception, debriefing, research with nonhuman animals, and scholarly integrity.

The general moral principles of weighing risks against benefits, acting with integrity, seeking justice, and respecting people's rights and dignity provide a useful starting point for thinking about the ethics of psychological research because essentially everyone agrees on them. As we have seen, however, even people who agree on these general principles can disagree about specific ethical issues that arise in the course of conducting research. This is why there also exist more detailed and enforceable ethics codes that provide guidance on important issues that arise frequently. In this section, we begin with a brief historical overview of such ethics codes and then look closely at the one that is most relevant to psychological research—that of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Historical Overview

One of the earliest ethics codes was the Nuremberg Code—a set of 10 principles written in 1947 in conjunction with the trials of Nazi physicians accused of shockingly cruel research on concentration camp prisoners during World War II. It provided a standard against which to compare the behavior of the men on trial—many of whom were eventually convicted and either imprisoned or sentenced to death. The Nuremberg Code was particularly clear about the importance of carefully weighing risks against benefits and the need for informed consent. The Declaration of Helsinki is a similar ethics code that was created by the World Medical Council in 1964. Among the standards that it added to the Nuremberg Code was that research with human participants should be based on a written protocol—a detailed description of the research—that is reviewed by an independent committee. The Declaration of Helsinki has been revised several times, most recently in 2004.
In the United States, concerns about the Tuskegee study and others led to the publication in 1978 of a set of federal guidelines called the **Belmont Report**. The Belmont Report explicitly recognized the principle of seeking **justice**, including the importance of conducting research in a way that distributes risks and benefits fairly across different groups at the societal level. It also recognized the importance of **respect for persons**, which acknowledges individuals' autonomy and protection for those with diminished autonomy (e.g., prisoners, children), and translates to the need for informed consent. Finally, it recognized the principle of **beneficence**, which underscores the importance of maximizing the benefits of research while minimizing harms to participants and society. The Belmont Report became the basis of a set of laws—the **Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects**—that apply to research conducted, supported, or regulated by the federal government. An extremely important part of these regulations is that universities, hospitals, and other institutions that receive support from the federal government must establish an **institutional review board (IRB)**—a committee that is responsible for reviewing research protocols for potential ethical problems. An IRB must consist of at least five people with varying backgrounds, including members of different professions, scientists and nonscientists, men and women, and at least one person not otherwise affiliated with the institution. The IRB helps to make sure that the risks of the proposed research are minimized, the benefits outweigh the risks, the research is carried out in a fair manner, and the informed consent procedure is adequate.

The federal regulations also distinguish research that poses three levels of risk. **Exempt research** is the lowest level of risk and includes research on the effectiveness of normal educational activities, the use of standard psychological measures and surveys of a nonsensitive nature that are administered in a way that maintains confidentiality, and research using existing data from public sources. It is called exempt because once approved, it is exempt from regular, continuous review. **Expedited research** poses a somewhat higher risk than exempt, but still exposes participants to risks that are no greater than minimal risk (those encountered by healthy people in daily life or during routine physical or psychological examinations). Expedited review is done by one member of the IRB or by a separate committee under the authority of the IRB that can only approve minimal risk research (many departments of psychology have such separate committees). Finally, research that does not qualify for exempt or expedited review is **greater than minimal risk research** must be reviewed by the full board of IRB members.

### Ethics Codes

The link that follows the list—from the Office of Human Subjects Research at the National Institutes of Health—allows you to read the ethics codes discussed in this section in their entirety. They are all highly recommended and, with the exception of the Federal Policy, short and easy to read.

- The Nuremberg Code
- The Declaration of Helsinki
- The Belmont Report
- Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects

https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/international/ethical-codes-and-research-standards/index.html

**APA Ethics Code**

The APA's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (also known as the **APA Ethics Code**) was first published in 1953 and has been revised several times since then, most recently in 2010. It includes about 150 specific
ethical standards that psychologists and their students are expected to follow. Much of the APA Ethics Code concerns
the clinical practice of psychology—advertising one’s services, setting and collecting fees, having personal relationships
with clients, and so on. For our purposes, the most relevant part is Standard 8: Research and Publication. Although
Standard 8 is reproduced here in its entirety, we will consider some of its most important aspects—informed consent,
deception, debriefing, the use of nonhuman animal subjects, and scholarly integrity—in more detail.

APA Ethics Code Standard 8: Research and Publication

8.01 Institutional Approval

When institutional approval is required, psychologists provide accurate information about their research proposals and
obtain approval prior to conducting the research. They conduct the research in accordance with the approved research
protocol.

8.02 Informed Consent to Research

3. When obtaining informed consent as required in Standard 3.10, Informed Consent, psychologists inform
participants about (1) the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures; (2) their right to decline to
participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun; (3) the foreseeable consequences of
deleing or withdrawing; (4) reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to
participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects; (5) any prospective research benefits; (6) limits
of confidentiality; (7) incentives for participation; and (8) whom to contact for questions about the research and
research participants’ rights. They provide opportunity for the prospective participants to ask questions and receive
answers. (See also Standards 8.03, Informed Consent for Recording Voices and Images in Research; 8.05,
Dispensing With Informed Consent for Research; and 8.07, Deception in Research.)

4. Psychologists conducting intervention research involving the use of experimental treatments clarify to participants
at the outset of the research (1) the experimental nature of the treatment; (2) the services that will or will not be
available to the control group(s) if appropriate; (3) the means by which assignment to treatment and control groups
will be made; (4) available treatment alternatives if an individual does not wish to participate in the research or
wishes to withdraw once a study has begun; and (5) compensation for or monetary costs of participating including,
if appropriate, whether reimbursement from the participant or a third-party payor will be sought. (See also Standard
8.02a, Informed Consent to Research.)

8.03 Informed Consent for Recording Voices and Images in Research

Psychologists obtain informed consent from research participants prior to recording their voices or images for data
collection unless (1) the research consists solely of naturalistic observations in public places, and it is not anticipated
that the recording will be used in a manner that could cause personal identification or harm, or (2) the research design
includes deception, and consent for the use of the recording is obtained during debriefing. (See also Standard 8.07,
Deception in Research.)

8.04 Client/Patient, Student, and Subordinate Research Participants

1. When psychologists conduct research with clients/patients, students, or subordinates as participants,
psychologists take steps to protect the prospective participants from adverse consequences of declining or
withdrawing from participation.

2. When research participation is a course requirement or an opportunity for extra credit, the prospective participant
is given the choice of equitable alternative activities.
8.05 Dispensing With Informed Consent for Research

Psychologists may dispense with informed consent only (1) where research would not reasonably be assumed to create distress or harm and involves (a) the study of normal educational practices, curricula, or classroom management methods conducted in educational settings; (b) only anonymous questionnaires, naturalistic observations, or archival research for which disclosure of responses would not place participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or damage their financial standing, employability, or reputation, and confidentiality is protected; or (c) the study of factors related to job or organization effectiveness conducted in organizational settings for which there is no risk to participants’ employability, and confidentiality is protected or (2) where otherwise permitted by law or federal or institutional regulations.

8.06 Offering Inducements for Research Participation

1. Psychologists make reasonable efforts to avoid offering excessive or inappropriate financial or other inducements for research participation when such inducements are likely to coerce participation.

2. When offering professional services as an inducement for research participation, psychologists clarify the nature of the services, as well as the risks, obligations, and limitations. (See also Standard 6.05, Barter With Clients/Patients.)

8.07 Deception in Research

1. Psychologists do not conduct a study involving deception unless they have determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study’s significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and that effective nondeceptive alternative procedures are not feasible.

2. Psychologists do not deceive prospective participants about research that is reasonably expected to cause physical pain or severe emotional distress.

3. Psychologists explain any deception that is an integral feature of the design and conduct of an experiment to participants as early as is feasible, preferably at the conclusion of their participation, but no later than at the conclusion of the data collection, and permit participants to withdraw their data. (See also Standard 8.08, Debriefing.)

8.08 Debriefing

1. Psychologists provide a prompt opportunity for participants to obtain appropriate information about the nature, results, and conclusions of the research, and they take reasonable steps to correct any misconceptions that participants may have of which the psychologists are aware.

2. If scientific or humane values justify delaying or withholding this information, psychologists take reasonable measures to reduce the risk of harm.

3. When psychologists become aware that research procedures have harmed a participant, they take reasonable steps to minimize the harm.

8.09 Humane Care and Use of Animals in Research

1. Psychologists acquire, care for, use, and dispose of animals in compliance with current federal, state, and local laws and regulations, and with professional standards.

2. Psychologists trained in research methods and experienced in the care of laboratory animals supervise all procedures involving animals and are responsible for ensuring appropriate consideration of their comfort, health, and humane treatment.

3. Psychologists ensure that all individuals under their supervision who are using animals have received instruction in
research methods and in the care, maintenance, and handling of the species being used, to the extent appropriate to their role. (See also Standard 2.05, Delegation of Work to Others.)

4. Psychologists make reasonable efforts to minimize the discomfort, infection, illness, and pain of animal subjects.

5. Psychologists use a procedure subjecting animals to pain, stress, or privation only when an alternative procedure is unavailable and the goal is justified by its prospective scientific, educational, or applied value.

6. Psychologists perform surgical procedures under appropriate anesthesia and follow techniques to avoid infection and minimize pain during and after surgery.

7. When it is appropriate that an animal's life be terminated, psychologists proceed rapidly, with an effort to minimize pain and in accordance with accepted procedures.

8.10 Reporting Research Results

5. Psychologists do not fabricate data. (See also Standard 5.01a, Avoidance of False or Deceptive Statements.)

6. If psychologists discover significant errors in their published data, they take reasonable steps to correct such errors in a correction, retraction, erratum, or other appropriate publication means.

8.11 Plagiarism

Psychologists do not present portions of another's work or data as their own, even if the other work or data source is cited occasionally.

8.12 Publication Credit

8. Psychologists take responsibility and credit, including authorship credit, only for work they have actually performed or to which they have substantially contributed. (See also Standard 8.12b, Publication Credit.)

9. Principal authorship and other publication credits accurately reflect the relative scientific or professional contributions of the individuals involved, regardless of their relative status. Mere possession of an institutional position, such as department chair, does not justify authorship credit. Minor contributions to the research or to the writing for publications are acknowledged appropriately, such as in footnotes or in an introductory statement.

10. Except under exceptional circumstances, a student is listed as principal author on any multiple-authored article that is substantially based on the student's doctoral dissertation. Faculty advisors discuss publication credit with students as early as feasible and throughout the research and publication process as appropriate. (See also Standard 8.12b, Publication Credit.)

8.13 Duplicate Publication of Data

Psychologists do not publish, as original data, data that have been previously published. This does not preclude republishing data when they are accompanied by proper acknowledgment.

8.14 Sharing Research Data for Verification

1. After research results are published, psychologists do not withhold the data on which their conclusions are based from other competent professionals who seek to verify the substantive claims through reanalysis and who intend to use such data only for that purpose, provided that the confidentiality of the participants can be protected and unless legal rights concerning proprietary data preclude their release. This does not preclude psychologists from requiring that such individuals or groups be responsible for costs associated with the provision of such information.

2. Psychologists who request data from other psychologists to verify the substantive claims through reanalysis may use shared data only for the declared purpose. Requesting psychologists obtain prior written agreement for all other uses of the data.
8.15 Reviewers

Psychologists who review material submitted for presentation, publication, grant, or research proposal review respect the confidentiality of and the proprietary rights in such information of those who submitted it.


Informed Consent

Standards 8.02 to 8.05 are about informed consent. Again, informed consent means obtaining and documenting people’s agreement to participate in a study, having informed them of everything that might reasonably be expected to affect their decision. This includes details of the procedure, the risks and benefits of the research, the fact that they have the right to decline to participate or to withdraw from the study, the consequences of doing so, and any legal limits to confidentiality. For example, some states require researchers who learn of child abuse or other crimes to report this information to authorities.

Although the process of obtaining informed consent often involves having participants read and sign a consent form, it is important to understand that this is not all it is. Although having participants read and sign a consent form might be enough when they are competent adults with the necessary ability and motivation, many participants do not actually read consent forms or read them but do not understand them. For example, participants often mistake consent forms for legal documents and mistakenly believe that by signing them they give up their right to sue the researcher (Mann, 1994).[1] Even with competent adults, therefore, it is good practice to tell participants about the risks and benefits, demonstrate the procedure, ask them if they have questions, and remind them of their right to withdraw at any time—in addition to having them read and sign a consent form.

Note also that there are situations in which informed consent is not necessary. These include situations in which the research is not expected to cause any harm and the procedure is straightforward or the study is conducted in the context of people’s ordinary activities. For example, if you wanted to sit outside a public building and observe whether people hold the door open for people behind them, you would not need to obtain their informed consent. Similarly, if a college instructor wanted to compare two legitimate teaching methods across two sections of his research methods course, he would not need to obtain informed consent from his students.

Deception

Deception of participants in psychological research can take a variety of forms: misinforming participants about the purpose of a study, using confederates, using phony equipment like Milgram’s shock generator, and presenting participants with false feedback about their performance (e.g., telling them they did poorly on a test when they actually did well). Deception also includes not informing participants of the full design or true purpose of the research even if they are not actively misinformed (Sieber, Iannuzzo, & Rodriguez, 1995).[2] For example, a study on incidental learning—learning without conscious effort—might involve having participants read through a list of words in preparation for a “memory test” later. Although participants are likely to assume that the memory test will require them to recall the words, it might instead require them to recall the contents of the room or the appearance of the research assistant.
Some researchers have argued that deception of research participants is rarely if ever ethically justified. Among their arguments are that it prevents participants from giving truly informed consent, fails to respect their dignity as human beings, has the potential to upset them, makes them distrustful and therefore less honest in their responding, and damages the reputation of researchers in the field (Baumrind, 1985).[3]

Note, however, that the APA Ethics Code takes a more moderate approach—allowing deception when the benefits of the study outweigh the risks, participants cannot reasonably be expected to be harmed, the research question cannot be answered without the use of deception, and participants are informed about the deception as soon as possible. This approach acknowledges that not all forms of deception are equally bad. Compare, for example, Milgram's study in which he deceived his participants in several significant ways that resulted in their experiencing severe psychological stress with an incidental learning study in which a "memory test" turns out to be slightly different from what participants were expecting. It also acknowledges that some scientifically and socially important research questions can be difficult or impossible to answer without deceiving participants. Knowing that a study concerns the extent to which they obey authority, act aggressively toward a peer, or help a stranger is likely to change the way people behave so that the results no longer generalize to the real world.

Debriefing

Standard 8.08 is about debriefing. This is the process of informing research participants as soon as possible of the purpose of the study, revealing any deception, and correcting any other misconceptions they might have as a result of participating. Debriefing also involves minimizing harm that might have occurred. For example, an experiment on the effects of being in a sad mood on memory might involve inducing a sad mood in participants by having them think sad thoughts, watch a sad video, and/or listen to sad music. Debriefing would be the time to return participants' moods to normal by having them think happy thoughts, watch a happy video, or listen to happy music.

Nonhuman Animal Subjects

Standard 8.09 is about the humane treatment and care of nonhuman animal subjects. Although most contemporary research in psychology does not involve nonhuman animal subjects, a significant minority of it does—especially in the study of learning and conditioning, behavioral neuroscience, and the development of drug and surgical therapies for psychological disorders.

The use of nonhuman animal subjects in psychological research is similar to the use of deception in that there are those who argue that it is rarely, if ever, ethically acceptable (Bowd & Shapiro, 1993).[4] Clearly, nonhuman animals are incapable of giving informed consent. Yet they can be subjected to numerous procedures that are likely to cause them suffering. They can be confined, deprived of food and water, subjected to pain, operated on, and ultimately euthanized. (Of course, they can also be observed benignly in natural or zoo-like settings.) Others point out that psychological research on nonhuman animals has resulted in many important benefits to humans, including the development of behavioral therapies for many disorders, more effective pain control methods, and antipsychotic drugs (Miller, 1985).[5] It has also resulted in benefits to nonhuman animals, including alternatives to shooting and poisoning as means of controlling them.

As with deception, the APA acknowledges that the benefits of research on nonhuman animals can outweigh the costs, in
which case it is ethically acceptable. However, researchers must use alternative methods when they can. When they cannot, they must acquire and care for their subjects humanely and minimize the harm to them. For more information on the APA’s position on nonhuman animal subjects, see the website of the APA’s Committee on Animal Research and Ethics (http://www.apa.org/science/leadership/care/index.aspx).

Scholarly Integrity

Standards 8.10 to 8.15 are about scholarly integrity. These include the obvious points that researchers must not fabricate data or plagiarize. Plagiarism means using others’ words or ideas without proper acknowledgment. Proper acknowledgment generally means indicating direct quotations with quotation marks and providing a citation to the source of any quotation or idea used. Self-plagiarism is also considered unethical and refers to publishing the same material more than once. In other words, researchers should not borrow prior phrasing from their other published works, just as students should not submit the same work to more than one class.

The remaining standards make some less obvious but equally important points. Researchers should not publish the same data a second time as though it were new, they should share their data with other researchers, and as peer reviewers, they should keep the unpublished research they review confidential. Note that the authors’ names on published research—and the order in which those names appear—should reflect the importance of each person’s contribution to the research. It would be unethical, for example, to include as an author someone who had made only minor contributions to the research (e.g., analyzing some of the data) or for a faculty member to make himself or herself the first author on research that was largely conducted by a student.

References