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Cover Story

# Five principles for research ethics

Cover your bases with these ethical strategies

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Not that long ago, academicians were often cautious about airing the ethical dilemmas they faced in their research and academic work, but that environment is changing today. Psychologists in academe are more likely to seek out the advice of their colleagues on issues ranging from [supervising graduate students \(/monitor/2012/07-08/advisor\)](#) to [how to handle sensitive research data \(/research-practice/conduct-research/data\)](#), says George Mason University psychologist June Tangney, PhD.

"There has been a real change in the last 10 years in people talking more frequently and more openly about ethical dilemmas of all sorts," she explains.

Indeed, researchers face an array of ethical requirements: They must meet professional, institutional and federal standards for conducting research with human participants, often supervise students they also teach and have to sort out authorship issues, just to name a few.

Here are five recommendations APA's Science Directorate gives to help researchers steer clear of ethical quandaries:

## 1. Discuss intellectual property frankly

Academe's competitive "publish-or-perish" mindset can be a recipe for trouble when it comes to [who gets credit for authorship \(/gradpsych/2006/01/cover-credit\)](#). The best way to avoid disagreements about who should get credit and

in what order is to talk about these issues at the beginning of a working relationship, even though many people often feel uncomfortable about such topics.

"It's almost like talking about money," explains Tangney. "People don't want to appear to be greedy or presumptuous."

APA's Ethics Code (/ethics/code) offers some guidance: It specifies that "faculty advisors discuss publication credit with students as early as feasible and throughout the research and publication process as appropriate." When researchers and students put such understandings in writing, they have a helpful tool to continually discuss and evaluate contributions as the research progresses.

However, even the best plans can result in disputes, which often occur because people look at the same situation differently. "While authorship should reflect the contribution," says APA Ethics Office Director Stephen Behnke, JD, PhD, "we know from social science research that people often overvalue their contributions to a project. We frequently see that in authorship-type situations. In many instances, both parties genuinely believe they're right." APA's Ethics Code stipulates that psychologists take credit only for work they have actually performed or to which they have substantially contributed and that publication credit should accurately reflect the relative contributions: "Mere possession of an institutional position, such as department chair, does not justify authorship credit," says the code. "Minor contributions to the research or to the writing for publications are acknowledged appropriately, such as in footnotes or in an introductory statement."

The same rules apply to students. If they contribute substantively to the conceptualization, design, execution, analysis or interpretation of the research reported, they should be listed as authors. Contributions that are primarily technical don't warrant authorship. In the same vein, advisers should not expect ex-officio authorship on their students' work.

Matthew McGue, PhD, of the University of Minnesota, says his psychology department has instituted a procedure to avoid murky authorship issues. "We actually have a formal process here where students make proposals for anything they do on the project," he explains. The process allows students and

faculty to more easily talk about research responsibility, distribution and authorship.

Psychologists should also be cognizant of situations where they have access to confidential ideas or research, such as reviewing journal manuscripts or research grants, or hearing new ideas during a presentation or informal conversation. While it's unlikely reviewers can purge all of the information in an interesting manuscript from their thinking, it's still unethical to take those ideas without giving credit to the originator.

"If you are a grant reviewer or a journal manuscript reviewer [who] sees someone's research [that] hasn't been published yet, you owe that person a duty of confidentiality and anonymity," says Gerald P. Koocher, PhD, editor of the journal *Ethics and Behavior* and co-author of "Ethics in Psychology: Professional Standards and Cases" (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Researchers also need to meet their ethical obligations once their research is published: If authors learn of errors that change the interpretation of research findings, they are ethically obligated to promptly correct the errors in a correction, retraction, erratum or by other means.

To be able to answer questions about study authenticity and allow others to reanalyze the results, authors should archive primary data and accompanying records for at least five years, advises University of Minnesota psychologist and researcher Matthew McGue, PhD. "Store all your data. Don't destroy it," he says. "Because if someone charges that you did something wrong, you can go back."

"It seems simple, but this can be a tricky area," says Susan Knapp, APA's deputy publisher. "The APA Publication Manual Section 8.05 has some general advice on what to retain and suggestions about things to consider in sharing data."

The APA Ethics Code requires psychologists to release their data to others who want to verify their conclusions, provided that participants' confidentiality can be protected and as long as legal rights concerning proprietary data don't preclude their release. However, the code also notes that psychologists who

request data in these circumstances can only use the shared data for reanalysis; for any other use, they must obtain a prior written agreement.

## 2. Be conscious of multiple roles

APA's Ethics Code says psychologists should avoid relationships that could reasonably impair their professional performance or could exploit or harm others. But it also notes that many kinds of multiple relationships aren't unethical--as long as they're not reasonably expected to have adverse effects.

That notwithstanding, psychologists should think carefully before entering into multiple relationships with any person or group, such as recruiting students or clients as participants in research studies or investigating the effectiveness of a product of a company whose stock they own.

For example, when recruiting students from your Psychology 101 course to participate in an experiment, be sure to make clear that participation is voluntary. If participation is a course requirement, be sure to note that in the class syllabus, and ensure that participation has educative value by, for instance, providing a thorough debriefing to enhance students' understanding of the study. The 2002 Ethics Code also mandates in Standard 8.04b that students be given equitable alternatives to participating in research.

Perhaps one of the most common multiple roles for researchers is being both a mentor and lab supervisor to students they also teach in class. Psychologists need to be especially cautious that they don't abuse the power differential between themselves and students, say experts. They shouldn't, for example, use their clout as professors to coerce students into taking on additional research duties.

By outlining the nature and structure of the supervisory relationship before supervision or mentoring begins, both parties can avoid misunderstandings, says George Mason University's Tangney. It's helpful to create a written agreement that includes both parties' responsibilities as well as authorship considerations, intensity of the supervision and other key aspects of the job.

"While that's the ideal situation, in practice we do a lot less of that than we ought to," she notes. "Part of it is not having foresight up front of how a project

or research study is going to unfold."

That's why experts also recommend that supervisors set up timely and specific methods to give students feedback and keep a record of the supervision, including meeting times, issues discussed and duties assigned.

If psychologists do find that they are in potentially harmful multiple relationships, they are ethically mandated to take steps to resolve them in the best interest of the person or group while complying with the Ethics Code.

### **3. Follow informed-consent rules**

When done properly, the consent process ensures that individuals are voluntarily participating in the research with full knowledge of relevant risks and benefits.

"The federal standard is that the person must have all of the information that might reasonably influence their willingness to participate in a form that they can understand and comprehend," says Koocher, dean of Simmons College's School for Health Studies.

APA's Ethics Code mandates that psychologists who conduct research should inform participants about:

- The purpose of the research, expected duration and procedures.
- Participants' rights to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once it has started, as well as the anticipated consequences of doing so.
- Reasonably foreseeable factors that may influence their willingness to participate, such as potential risks, discomfort or adverse effects.
- Any prospective research benefits.
- Limits of confidentiality, such as data coding, disposal, sharing and archiving, and when confidentiality must be broken.
- Incentives for participation.
- Who participants can contact with questions.

Experts also suggest covering the likelihood, magnitude and duration of harm or benefit of participation, emphasizing that their involvement is voluntary and discussing treatment alternatives, if relevant to the research.

Keep in mind that the Ethics Code includes specific mandates for researchers who conduct experimental treatment research. Specifically, they must inform individuals about the experimental nature of the treatment, services that will or will not be available to the control groups, how participants will be assigned to treatments and control groups, available treatment alternatives and compensation or monetary costs of participation.

If research participants or clients are not competent to evaluate the risks and benefits of participation themselves--for example, minors or people with cognitive disabilities--then the person who's giving permission must have access to that same information, says Koocher.

Remember that a signed consent form doesn't mean the informing process can be glossed over, say ethics experts. In fact, the APA Ethics Code says psychologists can skip informed consent in two instances only: When permitted by law or federal or institutional regulations, or when the research would not reasonably be expected to distress or harm participants and involves one of the following:

- The study of normal educational practices, curricula or classroom management methods conducted in educational settings.
- 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 for which confidentiality is protected.
- 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.

If psychologists are precluded from obtaining full consent at the beginning--for example, if the protocol includes deception, recording spontaneous behavior or the use of a confederate--they should be sure to offer a full debriefing after

data collection and provide people with an opportunity to reiterate their consent, advise experts.

The code also says psychologists should make reasonable efforts to avoid offering "excessive or inappropriate financial or other inducements for research participation when such inducements are likely to coerce participation."

#### 4. Respect confidentiality and privacy

Upholding individuals' rights to confidentiality and privacy is a central tenet of every psychologist's work. However, many privacy issues are idiosyncratic to the research population, writes Susan Folkman, PhD, in "[Ethics in Research with Human Participants \(/pubs/books/4312310\)](#)" (APA, 2000). For instance, researchers need to devise ways to ask whether participants are willing to talk about sensitive topics without putting them in awkward situations, say experts. That could mean they provide a set of increasingly detailed interview questions so that participants can stop if they feel uncomfortable.

And because research participants have the freedom to choose how much information about themselves they will reveal and under what circumstances, psychologists should be careful when recruiting participants for a study, says Sangeeta Panicker, PhD, director of the APA Science Directorate's Research Ethics Office. For example, it's inappropriate to obtain contact information of members of a support group to solicit their participation in research. However, you could give your colleague who facilitates the group a letter to distribute that explains your research study and provides a way for individuals to contact you, if they're interested.

Other steps researchers should take include:

- **Discuss the limits of confidentiality.** Give participants information about how their data will be used, what will be done with case materials, photos and audio and video recordings, and secure their consent.
- **Know federal and state law.** Know the ins and outs of state and federal law that might apply to your research. For instance, the Goals 2000: Education Act of 1994 prohibits asking children about religion, sex or family life without parental permission.

Another example is that, while most states only require licensed psychologists to comply with mandatory reporting laws, some laws also require researchers to report abuse and neglect. That's why it's important for researchers to plan for situations in which they may learn of such reportable offenses. Generally, research psychologists can consult with a clinician or their institution's legal department to decide the best course of action.

- **Take practical security measures.** Be sure confidential records are stored in a secure area with limited access, and consider stripping them of identifying information, if feasible. Also, be aware of situations where confidentiality could inadvertently be breached, such as having confidential conversations in a room that's not soundproof or putting participants' names on bills paid by accounting departments.
- **Think about data sharing before research begins.** If researchers plan to share their data with others, they should note that in the consent process, specifying how they will be shared and whether data will be anonymous. For example, researchers could have difficulty sharing sensitive data they've collected in a study of adults with serious mental illnesses because they failed to ask participants for permission to share the data. Or developmental data collected on videotape may be a valuable resource for sharing, but unless a researcher asked permission back then to share videotapes, it would be unethical to do so. When sharing, psychologists should use established techniques when possible to protect confidentiality, such as coding data to hide identities. "But be aware that it may be almost impossible to entirely cloak identity, especially if your data include video or audio recordings or can be linked to larger databases," says Merry Bullock, PhD, associate executive director in APA's Science Directorate.
- **Understand the limits of the Internet.** Since Web technology is constantly evolving, psychologists need to be technologically savvy to conduct research online and cautious when exchanging confidential information electronically. If you're not a Internet whiz, get the help of someone who is. Otherwise, it may be possible for others to tap into data that you thought was properly protected.

## 5. Tap into ethics resources



One of the best ways researchers can avoid and resolve ethical dilemmas is to know both what their ethical obligations are and what resources are available to them.

"Researchers can help themselves make ethical issues salient by reminding themselves of the basic underpinnings of research and professional ethics," says Bullock. Those basics include:

- **The Belmont Report.** Released by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1979, the report provided the ethical framework for ensuing human participant research regulations and still serves as the basis for human participant protection legislation (see Further Reading).
- **APA's Ethics Code** (</ethics/code>), which offers general principles and specific guidance for research activities.

Moreover, despite the sometimes tense relationship researchers can have with their institutional review boards (IRBs), these groups can often help researchers think about how to address potential dilemmas before projects begin, says Panicker. But psychologists must first give their IRBs the information they need to properly understand a research proposal.

"Be sure to provide the IRB with detailed and comprehensive information about the study, such as the consent process, how participants will be recruited and how confidential information will be protected," says Bullock. "The more information you give your IRB, the better educated its members will become about behavioral research, and the easier it will be for them to facilitate your research."

As cliché as it may be, says Panicker, thinking positively about your interactions with an IRB can help smooth the process for both researchers and the IRBs reviewing their work.

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