Revising the ethics code for psychologists

When psychologists were condescendingly called worm runners little was said about the ethical implications of feeding planaria to each other or making dogs salivate on cue. Most research on humans dealt with rates of learning, and the experiments had little or no effect on the subjects. So when the American Psychological Association formulated and adopted a code of ethics in 1953, there was no emphasis on ethical standards for research on human subjects.

But in the last two decades, psychologists have broadened their interests to include such things as psychological stress and natural, social behavior of humans. New experimental techniques that could have effects, harmful or otherwise, on the subjects being studied were devised. Studying stress, for example, involves subjecting persons to various forms of potentially dangerous stress. Studies of natural behavior are valid only when done without the subject's knowledge. This could involve invasion of privacy.

As this type of psychological research grew, so did the need for research subjects. First-year psychology students were often required to take part in experiments as part of their course work. Prisoners, patients and members of the military were studied, sometimes without consent. Those who did volunteer or consent were not always fully informed about the experiment. Sometimes the research findings were not kept confidential. Psychologists do not have the privileged relationship accorded to doctors, lawyers and priests. It is possible that a researcher studying drug use among students could be called upon to testify against those students.

For these and other ethical reasons, a growing concern for the rights of the research subject accompanied the radically changed research activities. Public outcry, Congressional investigations and concern among the psychologists themselves prompted the APA, in 1970, to begin rewriting its outdated statement on ethical standards for research with humans.

An ad hoc Committee on Ethical Standards in Psychological Research was formed with Stuart W. Cook of the University of Colorado at Boulder as its chairman. "New research methods and the immorality of the misuse of research made us realize we ought to have a better set of standards," he says. "Unless we got one, we were in danger of having our research activities regulated by sources outside the profession."

With this impetus the APA requested and received three-year grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health for the development of a new set of ethical principles.

Approximately 5,000 descriptions of research involving ethical questions were supplied by APA members. "This," says Cook, "gave us the problems the members felt, not the problems we thought they might feel." This raw material was used to formulate and draft a proposed set of ethical principles that were published last July in the APA MONITOR. The 30,000 APA members were then asked to review and criticize the statement. Discussions were scheduled at the national, regional and local meetings. Psychology departments at universities, colleges, medical schools, research institutions, hospitals, clinics and government agencies were asked to contribute suggestions.

Reaction was diverse. Some psychologists thought the principles too restrictive—protecting the research subject at the cost of scientific inquiry. Others considered the principles too ambiguous—giving psychologists the right to carry out any experiment if the greater good of society was served. Finally, some complained that the statement was too long and complicated.

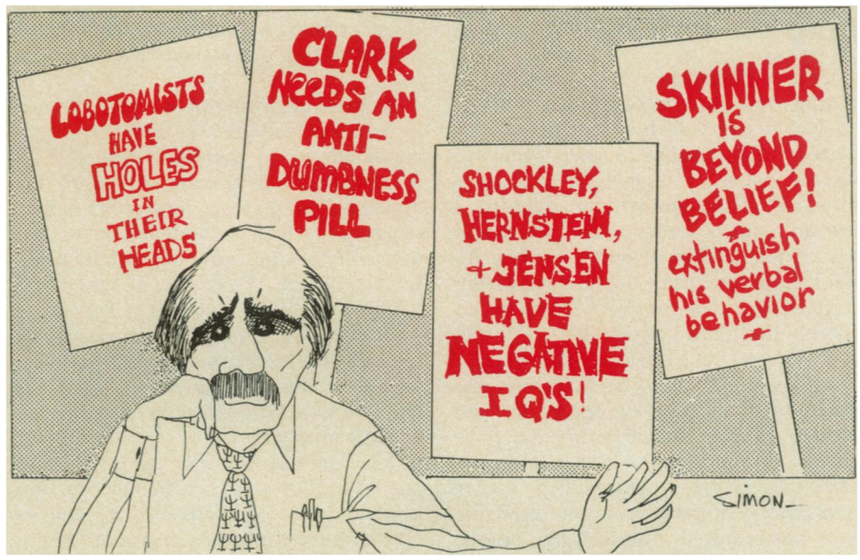
The statement was extensively revised and has been resubmitted to the membership in the May APA MONITOR. The revised form consists of 10 briefly worded, general principles followed by a lengthy description of each with examples and discussion. The main points are:

- The final responsibility for or against conducting a given experiment remains with the investigator.
- The investigator should obtain informed consent. When deception or concealment is necessary, adequate means must be taken to ensure the participant's understanding of the scientific grounds for the concealment.
- Individuals should be free to choose to participate in research or not and to discontinue at any time.
- Prior agreements, defining responsibilities of each, must be made clear and honored by the investigator.
- If physical or mental stress is involved, it should be kept to a minimum and the participant must agree to it.
- Upon completion of data collection, the investigator should provide full clarification of the nature of the study and employ appropriate measures to detect, remove or correct any misunderstandings or undesirable consequences.
- The investigator should keep in confidence all information obtained about research subjects.

Once again Cook is asking for comments, but he hopes to have the final version ready by October. At that time it will be reviewed by the APA's Board of Scientific Affairs, the Board of Directors and finally by the Council of Representatives. If approved by all it will be adopted as an official statement of the APA and distributed to the members. The Ethics Committee will then have the power to censure or expel any member who does not comply with the new principles.

The basic effect of the statement, however, will come not from what it says, but from how it was produced. "The idea," Cook says, "was to change people's [psychologist's] behavior rather than to just get something printed up somewhere." The method used, he explains, got as many of the members as possible involved. It sensitized them to the issues and, he hopes, will force them into a commitment to the new code. □

Why isn't anybody protesting my research? Isn't it any good?



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Ethical codes are being reexamined as psychology enters controversial areas.