

APA Adopts Detailed Code on Human Experimentation

After 4 years of gathering data and talking, the American Psychological Association (APA) has adopted what is probably the world's most exhaustive set of ethical principles governing psychological research with human beings.

The ten principles, backed up by a report containing discussions of dozens of actual research problems, represent the first attempt to update guidelines on human experimentation since the association adopted its code of ethics in 1953.

The six-man committee that prepared the report used an approach apparently unique to the APA. Committee chairman Stuart W. Cook, of the University of Colorado's Institute for Behavioral Science, says that, instead of using the traditional "wise man" approach, in which authoritative sources are consulted on what's "right," the APA polled its members to find out what kinds of ethical questions were arising in their research with human subjects.

The final report, which reflects in condensed form the thinking of thousands of psychologists, is expected to be useful as an educational document for psychology teachers and students of ethics and as a model for ethics codes for other behavioral sciences.

New ethical guidance is needed for psychologists, in particular, because during the past two decades the profession has moved into new areas of "socially relevant" research. Twenty years ago, experimentation with human subjects usually meant laboratory tests of discrete phenomena such as perception and cognition. Now research is getting into sensitive matters such as racial attitudes, sexual behavior, and the use of drugs. Investigators are moving out of the laboratory and into "natural conditions," where, as committee member Phil H. Schoggen says, they "study psychological and sociological phenomena on the hoof." Subjects (now more democratically called "participants" by the APA) are drawn from all segments of society, and many of them—as in studies of crowd reaction to a contrived incident on the street—don't even know they are participating. The report says: "as investigators turn with increasing frequency to research on questions that have immediate relevance for personal and social problems," a variety of research techniques such as the "use of deception, the invasion of privacy, the induction of mental or physical stress, and the administration of drugs" pose threats to the "welfare and dignity" of participants.

The use of deception in one form or another is a basic element in many psychological experiments. It can mean staging a fake robbery to see how bystanders react or administering a test to someone and telling him he did poorly to see how he reacts to the stress of being found inadequate. Many tests of this nature create feelings of anxiety, anger, or low self-esteem. It is the investigator's responsibility not only to give subjects a thorough debriefing at the end of such experiments, but to follow up to be sure there are no lingering ill effects.

One of the basic purposes of the new principles is to expand the concept of "informed consent." Where this is unfeasible—for example, when investigators are cov-

ertly filming shopping behavior in a supermarket—identities of the "participants" must be protected. In other experiments, an investigator is required to give a participant a complete explanation of any aspect of the experiment that might be expected to influence his decision to participate—including the sponsorship of the research and the uses to which the results may be put.

The principles also emphasize the constant need to weigh scientific against human ethics and, in cases where physical or mental stress are involved, to minimize the stress as much as possible. The aim of this whole approach is to leave the participant in as good or better shape as he was at the beginning, which means in some cases that he would be treated to a "compensatory profitable experience" at the end of the experiment.

One of the stickiest problems the committee ran into is the use of undergraduate students, who make up the "subject pool" for research in psychology departments. It has been a customary requirement for students taking certain courses that they act as research subjects, the justification being that it is part of their social responsibility since they are profiting from the contributions of the research participants who preceded them. There is some question, though, as to whether they should be compelled to contribute to experiments from which they stand to gain nothing. In its first draft of the principles, the committee suggested that students should not be required to be part of the subject pool, but this raised cries from psychology department chairmen, who pointed out that this would make subject recruitment difficult and expensive, and potentially valuable research might not get done. Most people seem to be happy with the final version, which suggests how student coercion can be minimized and the educational benefits of participation maximized.

The committee's final report is the result of a long and sometimes agonizing process that included designing questionnaires, sending them out to some 20,000 of the association's 35,000 members, and evaluating thousands of replies. Complete drafts of the report were printed in the *APA Monitor* in 1971 and 1972; these drew additional comments, on which further revisions were based. Committee members held numerous meetings with graduate departments and other professional groups, including lawyers, ministers, and sociologists, around the country. The ongoing work has been kept in view by means of ethics symposiums held at every APA meeting for the past 3 years.

The ethics project was done with the aid of \$82,000 in grants from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Science Foundation. APA officials feel it's all paying off. Miriam Kelty, administrative officer of scientific affairs, says there has been a huge demand for reprints from other associations, as well as from private companies engaged in psychological research. Most important, as Cook points out, the public and participatory nature of the entire procedure has raised the level of consciousness of APA members and "increased their commitment to abide by the principles they helped formulate."—CONSTANCE HOLDEN