Ethical and psychological considersations when research has the potential to do harm

A position paper

Introduction: Ethical practice when conducting research, either in the public or private sector is of central importance. Recent reports in the media concerning research on car emmissions, or the work of Cambridge Analytics, have raised important questions concerning regulation and ethical oversight. This position paper is not a commentary on these specific cases; for clarity we restate here some general principles.

Conflicts of interest: transparency: When research is funded so that a particular case can be made there is a major risk of bias. Bias comes in many forms and to deal with a major part of this in the field of pharmaceutical research, a campaign to publish all clinical trials has been successful in compelling companies to post online in advance what they intend (so they can't change it half way through) and to publish all results whether they support their case or not (http://www.alltrials.net). Such transparency is likely to be a major antidote to the biases that come in to play in this area. Psychologists endorse this and support researchers to adopt this approach in their research efforts.

Deception by the applicant – honesty: If an applicant deceives an ethics committee, it is clearly a serious matter, and so is falsifying evidence. Psychologists have been guilty of deception in their research, for example, a well-known social psychologist has been found to have fabricated data in a large numbers of studies (The Levelt Committee, The Drenth Committee, & The Noort Committee, 2012) and this has led to a scientific approach to detecting such fraud using statistical methods. These are reported on the website Retraction Watch (https://retractionwatch.com). While such fraud is to be condemned, it is to the credit of the scientific community, including psychological science, that it has responded by developing these techniques. Nevertheless, of course, it should be clear that ethical scientific research can be accomplished if researchers are committed to importance of integrity and not simply because dishonesty can be detected.

Justification for animal experiments: three R´s: This is an area where psychologists do conduct experiments on animals of course, and there are strong opinions on both sides of the argument (http://www.iaapea.com/index.php; https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-29/august/why-research-using-animals-important-psychology). The position that most effectively captures the mainstream opinion are the principles of Replacement, Reduction and Refinement: that animals should only be used when there are no alternatives to their use; that the number of animals used in procedures causing pain or distress should be minimized; and that the severity of such procedures should also be minimized (British Psychological Society Research Board Statement of Policy on the Use of Animals in Psychology https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-guidelines-psychologists-working-animals-2012; The Three R's https://www.nc3rs.org.uk/the-3rs)

Risk and Benefits: balance: Research with human participation should not involve risks and burdens for the humans disproportionate to its potential benefits, as it states the Additional Protocol to the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, concerning Biomedical Research. Additionally, if the research has not direct benefit for the participants, it should be acceptable only if it not entails risk and burden for the participants considered more than acceptable. Psychologists are not asking people for consent in research that not accomplish these conditions.

Consent: Where people participate in research studies, psychologists and other social scientists should take a number of considerations into account. The person, for instance, needs to be given the necessary information so that their consent is 'informed'. And in addition to this, the researchers must take care that the person fully understands the nature of the study and the risks involved. For psychologists these protections are absolutely essential to ensure that nobody takes part in research without full understanding, and that they are not coerced in any way. Participants are free to withdraw from the experiment at any time.

Psychologists approach: Psychology as a science is one of the disciplines dependent on research findings. Standards and principles of research have been developed throughout the history of the profession - sometimes from positive efforts to improve quality, sometimes the results of fraud (see above) and other errors. Today, we can say that the field of psychology has ethical standards and principles that give psychologists a sound framework for their research work. Among these, valid consent is essential, because it states the necessity to inform the participants about the processes behind the research, as well as the possible risks of it. Participants can then decide in a responsible way on whether to accept these or not. They can only do this of course, if they were informed about it in an understandable manner.

In addition, psychology also defines procedures of research reasoning, preparation, execution and conclusion of empirical research work, which take into consideration the participants' wellbeing and not only the contribution of the research to the good of society.

The respect for individual rights and dignity, professional competences, responsibility and professional integrity are the main principles of European psychologists and the breach of these is understood as unethical research work. Further on, the research ethics is described in the Helsinki declaration, EFPA's Meta Code of Ethics and Model Code of Ethics and other documents. The World Health Organisation has also developed some very clear guidance on research ethics (see (http://www.who.int/ethics/research/en/). The safety and the freedom to participate are at the core of these demands. Psychological research done according to these premises is hopefully beneficial for all the European citizens who profit from the services of psychologists.

References

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