



The British  
Psychological Society

# Code of Ethics and Conduct



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# 1 Introduction

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- 1.1 The British Psychological Society sets and upholds high standards of professionalism, and promotes ethical behaviour, attitudes and judgements on the part of Psychologists. Under the terms of its Royal Charter, the Society maintains a Code of Ethics and Conduct; which has been regularly updated prior to this current revision, most recently in 2009 (archived version available on the website).
- 1.2 In formulating this Code, existing Codes, Society guidance and changes in societal expectations of professionals were considered. This Code is the over-arching guidance document for all members of the Society; specific additional guidance is provided in the *Code of Human Research Ethics* and *Practice Guidelines*. Additional support can be found on the Society's website: **[www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)**.



- 1.3 The Code contains the professional standards that members of the Society should uphold. The aim of the Code is to provide a framework for guiding the decision-making for all psychologists. The framework allows sufficient flexibility for a variety of approaches, contexts and methods and reflects the ethical standards that apply to all. Psychologists need to familiarise themselves with any legal frameworks, regulatory requirements and other guidance relevant to the particular context in which they work including any specific guidance in the *Code of Human Research Ethics* and *Practice Guidelines*.

- 1.4 We live in a rapidly changing world, where new ethical challenges come from many sources. These include the unprecedented opportunities provided by innovations in science and technology as well as the threats posed by climate change and global conflicts. Supplementary guidance on these new challenges is often published by the Society and can be found at: **[www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)**.
- 1.5 Psychologists may need to make decisions in difficult, changing and unclear situations. The Society expects that the Code will be used to form a basis for consideration of ethical questions, with the Principles in this Code being taken into account in the process of making decisions, together with the needs of persons, peoples and organisations in the specific circumstances in which the decision is to be made. No code can replace the need for Psychologists to use their own professional and ethical judgement.
- 1.6 Principles and the Codes that spell out their application serve primarily as guidelines for thinking about the decisions individuals need to make. The discipline of Psychology, both as a science and a profession, exists within the context of human society. Accordingly, a shared collective duty for the welfare of human and non-human beings, both within the societies in which Psychologists live and work, and beyond them, is acknowledged.
- 1.7 It is important for Psychologists to be aware of research that has relevance to ethics.
- 1.8 Behaving ethically requires ethical awareness – noticing what ethical issues are raised by a course of action makes it more likely that ethical practice will follow.
- 1.9 Ethical reasoning is often subject to various competing biases. Maintaining awareness of such biases is important when trying to think through ethical challenges. These considerations currently include but are not limited to, salience (how readily something comes to mind), confirmation bias (the human tendency to look for evidence that confirms their belief and to ignore other evidence), loss aversion (behaviour to avoid loss),

beliefs about disclosure (tendency to be more honest when they believe their actions will be known by others), and dissonance reduction (acting to maintain consistent beliefs). This list will evolve over time with the advancement of knowledge in this area. Psychologists are therefore well placed and encouraged to consider these factors in their own decision-making.

- 1.10 Acting ethically can be affected by a number of individual and group influences as well as context, so even though an individual may be aware of ethical issues and has worked through the decision-making process, their motivation or ability to act ethically may be compromised. Key considerations include conformity and resistance, context, power, emotion, and the role of social norms, organisational pressures and group/self-identity. Psychologists are well placed to consider and reflect on these factors in their own decision-making.
- 1.11 Psychologists should consider it good practice to record their decision processes when confronted with a particularly challenging ethical issue so that it is available for future reference if that decision is re-visited.
- 1.12 Acting ethically depends on many skills including a capacity for leadership, effective prioritisation and risk management. Decisions may have to be made about which of many competing ethically relevant actions should come first, or between courses of action where none are entirely optimal. Fear, difficulty, fatigue and perverse reward systems are some of the many environmental issues that could influence implementation of a decision.
- 1.13 As Psychologists, we are aware of the importance of both context and character affecting our behaviour. Being aware of how to develop character strength has a long tradition. This Code therefore encourages all Psychologists to be mindful of their strengths and weaknesses in order that they are able to behave in the most ethical way possible.

## 2. Structure of the Code

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2.1 This Code is based on four ethical Principles, which constitute the main domains of responsibility, within which ethical issues are considered. These have been agreed after many years of consultation within and outside the profession. The manner in which they apply and the contexts that they apply in will inevitably change over time.

They are:

- (i) Respect;
- (ii) Competence;
- (iii) Responsibility;
- (iv) Integrity.

2.2 Each Principle is described in a statement of values, reflecting the fundamental beliefs that guide ethical reasoning, decision-making and behaviour. Under each principle we list issues and considerations that Psychologists should be aware of in applying the Principles in their work. Broad 'headline' categories are included and a list additional resources that expand on the application of these values in the Psychologist's field of work are provided at the end of this document.

## 3. Ethical principles

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### 3.1 Respect

**Respect for the dignity of persons and peoples** is one of the most fundamental and universal ethical principles across geographical and cultural boundaries, and across professional disciplines. It provides the philosophical foundation for many of the other ethical Principles. Respect for dignity recognises the inherent worth of all human beings, regardless of perceived or real differences in social status, ethnic origin, gender, capacities, or any other such group-based characteristics. This inherent worth means that all human beings are worthy of equal moral consideration.

**Statement of values:** Psychologists value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over persons and peoples and with particular regard to people's rights.

In applying these values, Psychologists should consider:

- (i) Privacy and confidentiality;
- (ii) Respect;
- (iii) Communities and shared values within them;
- (iv) Impacts on the broader environment – living or otherwise;
- (v) Issues of power;
- (vi) Consent;
- (vii) Self-determination;
- (viii) The importance of compassionate care, including empathy, sympathy, generosity, openness, distress tolerance, commitment and courage.

## 3.2 Competence

Psychologists, whether academic, practitioner or in training, may offer a range of services that usually require specialist knowledge, training, skill and experience. Competence refers to their ability to provide those specific services to a requisite professional standard. A psychologist should not provide professional services that are outside their areas of knowledge, skill, training and experience.

**Statement of values:** Psychologists value the continuing development and maintenance of high standards of competence in their professional work and the importance of working within the recognised limits of their knowledge, skill, training, education and experience.

In applying these values, Psychologists should consider:

- (i) Possession or otherwise of appropriate skills and care needed to serve persons and peoples;
- (ii) The limits of their competence and the potential need to refer on to another professional;
- (iii) Advances in the evidence base;
- (iv) The need to maintain technical and practical skills;
- (v) Matters of professional ethics and decision-making;
- (vi) Any limitations to their competence to practise taking mitigating actions as necessary;
- (vii) Caution in making knowledge claims.

## 3.3 Responsibility

Because of their acknowledged expertise, Psychologists enjoy professional autonomy; responsibility is an essential element of autonomy. Psychologists must accept appropriate responsibility for what is within their power, control or management.

Awareness of responsibility ensures that the trust of others is not abused, the power of influence is properly managed and that duty towards others is always paramount.



**Statement of values:** Psychologists value their responsibilities to persons and peoples, to the general public, and to the profession and science of Psychology, including the avoidance of harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contribution to society.

In applying these values, psychologists should consider:

- (i) Professional accountability;
- (ii) Responsible use of their knowledge and skills;
- (iii) Respect for the welfare of human, non-humans and the living world;
- (iv) Potentially competing duties.

### 3.4 Integrity

Acting with integrity includes being honest, truthful, accurate and consistent in one's actions, words, decisions, methods and outcomes. It requires setting self-interest to one side and being objective and open to challenge in one's behaviour in a professional context.

**Statement of values:** Psychologists value honesty, probity, accuracy, clarity and fairness in their interactions with all persons and peoples, and seek to promote integrity in all facets of their scientific and professional endeavours.

In applying these values, Psychologists should consider:

- (i) Honesty, openness and candour;
- (ii) Accurate unbiased representation;
- (iii) Fairness;
- (iv) Avoidance of exploitation and conflicts of interest (including self-interest);
- (v) Maintaining personal and professional boundaries;
- (vi) Addressing misconduct.

## 4 Conclusion

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- 4.1 This Code cannot and does not aim to provide the answer to every ethical decision a Psychologist may face. The Code provides the parameters within which professional judgements should be made. However, it is important to remember to reflect and apply a process to resolve ethical challenges.

## 5 Further information

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- 5.1 If you have a question about the Code or about professional ethics, there are several potential sources of advice. There is a dedicated Ethics area on the Society's website which provides a range of resources, including Frequently Asked Questions. ([www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)).
- 5.2 The Society strongly recommends that all members consider taking out professional indemnity insurance that includes legal cover. Professional indemnity insurance is a legal requirement for members who are registered with the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC).
- 5.3 The Society cannot determine allegations for fitness to practise. For further details about making a complaint about a Psychologist – please go to **[www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)** or the HCPC website: **[www.hcpc-uk.co.uk](http://www.hcpc-uk.co.uk)**.

The Society is only able to consider allegations against Society members acting as members of the Society and not in their professional capacity. These will be dealt with in accordance with the Member Conduct Rules.

### Other key documents

- British Psychological Society (2014). *Code of Human Research Ethics*. Leicester: Author
- British Psychological Society (2015). *Guidance on Teaching and Assessment of Ethical Competence in Psychology*. Leicester: Author.
- British Psychological Society (2017). *Practice Guidelines*. Leicester: Author.

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