

The morals and ethics of Psychology



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reprinted from the Excalibur

"I have some doubts about psychologists suddenly being intrigued by ethics when some of them can't even spell it. I wonder if so much talk about ethics isn't like that of the pub Don Juan - we spend so much time talking about it that there's no time to actually do it."

The speaker was Dr. Graham Reed, York's Dean of Graduate Studies, opening a conference on "Ethics in Psychological Research", held recently at Atkinson College in Toronto.

The conference reflected some widespread concerns among psychologists. What are the researcher's moral obligations? What does he owe his subjects, and his community?

Many have felt that the creation of a formal code of rules could help solve these problems, by giving researchers a set of criteria with which they can guide their studies. Much of the conference centered on discussing what these criteria should be, and how they might be enforced. But Reed brought up a question which cuts far deeper.

What are the implications of assuming that psychological research requires moral considerations other than those normally given any human activity?

Comments made by Reed and others during the conference suggest that naive acceptance of this assumption has been responsible for a number of problems ranging from unethical practices to just plain silliness.

Of course, there are at least two reasons why a group might require a special moral code.

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One was pointed out and challenged by Reed. "To demand a special code of ethics suggests that we have special powers for harming people. There's a certain arrogance in this assertion. We want to be like surgeons or physicians. We've kidded ourselves for years that we've got these special powers and now we're trying to alibi that claim by devising a special code."

The other was discussed, and rejected, by Dr. H. Bassford, a philosophy professor from Atkinson College. He pointed out that special ethical codes are necessary when society gives special moral responsibilities to a group that outweigh normal ethical considerations. Hangmen, he offered as an example, are considered excused from killing people because of their special responsibility to rid society of criminals. The special responsibility of psychological researchers, Bassford noted, is the advancement of knowledge, but time and again, he argued, society has not allowed this goal to supercede ordinary moral considerations. The Nazi doctors, for

example, were not excused for their medical experiments on prisoners just because they argued that they had advanced human understanding. Psychological researchers, Bassford concluded, are only as morally responsible as any other persons: no more, no less.

But whether or not these claims for "specialness" have ever been justified, psychologists have at various times accepted them, with some interesting consequences.

In fact, it was this very belief that ordinary moral considerations can be suspended for the sake of pursuing knowledge that led to the excesses of the early sixties that in Reed's words "precipitated Psychology's morbid preoccupation with ethics." As speaker after speaker in the conference noted, the alarm over psychology's use of deception was first set off by Milgram's infamous experiments on obedience.

In these studies — originally designed to investigate cultural differences in willingness to obey authority — subjects were led to believe that the "learning experiment" in which they were taking part required them to deliver higher and higher levels of painful, and potentially dangerous, electric shocks to another subject. In fact, the shocks were not

actually being delivered and the other "subject" was an experimenter.

Much to Milgram's surprise, many American subjects (who were to be compared to German subjects) were willing to deliver these shocks, obeying the authority of the psychologist who ran the study. Wide publicity of these results prompted the psychological community to re-consider their ethics. Could any amount of knowledge gained justify the deception of these subjects and the possible psychological pain they underwent when confronted with their own potential for cruelty?

While such discussion was no doubt needed, it's ironic that psychology's answer to the problem was not to challenge the assumption that created the problem, but to formally enshrine it. The psychological associations in Britain, the U.S. and Canada each created codes requiring researchers to weigh the benefits of knowledge against the costs of possible stresses on or deceptions of subjects.

This move has been open to the charge that it puts the authority in the wrong hands.

Thus, Reed pointed out, "It's us, the possible criminals who determine how we should behave!" Moreover, he noted, "the function of any moral philosophy is to avoid moral dilemmas. If, as in our case, it makes every case a moral dilemma, it's an empty system."

So this assumption of "specialness"

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has not only led to ethically questionable behaviour, it has also helped to create what it, by at least one estimation, is an empty set of guidelines. Furthermore, it has led to a considerable amount of silliness. By considering themselves as a special group with special powers, psychologists have at times applied ridiculously rigid constraints on their own behaviour.

One example of this was provided by Bassford in his discussion of the agonizing that some psychologists go through over the meaning of "informed consent." Most agree that subjects must be aware if there are any possible negative outcomes of an experiment, that they must know that they are free to leave the experiment at any time, and that they must not be coerced into participating.

But some psychologists, Bassford pointed out, interpret these restrictions more severely for themselves than what is normally accepted for other groups in our society. "An army sergeant asking for volunteers," he said, "doesn't detail each and every danger of the mission. He simply tells the soldiers that it will be dangerous." Yet some psychologists feel that for subject to be properly informed they must know every detail of an experiment, thereby making the experiment impossible to do since people do not behave naturally when they know how their behaviour is being observed.

Similarly, Bassford noted, others ponder *ad nauseum* the meaning of "coercion", wondering if the awe in which subjects hold psychologists has not unduly persuaded them to participate in a

study. Bassford pointed out that this worry is philosophically inconsistent. The concern for individual rights stems from a recognition of these individuals as free moral agents, and as such, he said, "we have to allow people to make their own decisions, even if they are poor ones."

A more concrete example of the kind of silliness that can result from considering research psychologists as a group with special moral responsibilities was provided by Dr. D. Wiesenhal, a professor of social psychology here at York. He pointed to a case in which a York psychology professor was told by the university ethics review committee that he could not study the effect on caffeine on attention (administering a dose equivalent to three cups of coffee) without the presence of a physician. "This," said Wiesenhal, "when on the very same campus anyone can walk into Central Square and buy enough coffee to kill themselves."

What these examples suggest is that many of psychology's problems with ethics — from grossly unethical behavior to codes so strict as to be silly — could be cured by demoting psychological researchers from their "special status" and applying to them the same moral standards that are applied to everyone else.

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As usual, Reed put it best. "We wouldn't have to bother about codes of ethics if we were generally good in our behavior." While psychologists seem to be obsessed about ethics, he noted, they routinely cheat without giving it a thought: they pad their curriculum vitae, they give out-of-date lectures, they leave data out of analysis, when they don't fit the experimental hypothesis. "I think it's a paradox," he said, "that we should be so fussy about morals when our lives are so rampant with immorality. Take the seven deadly sins — pride, covetousness, lust, envy ... my goodness, you're up to your armpits in it."