

# Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

## Ethical Codes

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A code of ethics specifies the proper conduct of members of a particular group. This article focuses on codes of ethics in the social sciences. Codes are controversial. They ignore the duty of a professional to simply be moral and are rarely used for guidance by practicing professionals. Codes testify to the claim that the profession recognizes special obligations to society that transcend economic self-interest or normal [p. 322 ↓] standards of morality. They help moral professionals resist pressures to compromise as well as legitimizing one's objections to poor work by other professionals and enhancing the profession's reputation and working environment. Professional societies may use them to censure or expel misbehaving members. Violation of ethics codes is not, per se, legally punishable, but it may be admissible as evidence in some legal proceedings. The role of codes is best understood in historical context.

## History

Until about 1800, professionals were considered gentlemen who needed no written rules of behavior. Mere suggestion that a professional was dishonorable might result in law suits, pamphlet wars, or even duels. The inappropriateness of such idiosyncratic standards was recognized in 1792, when physicians at the Manchester Infirmary waged a pamphlet war and work stoppage during the outbreak of an epidemic. Outraged hospital trustees requested that Dr. Thomas Percival draft rules to prevent future breakdowns of professional morality. Percival's rules, published in 1794, listed specific duties of physicians, asserting the importance of common professional standards and establishing the moral independence of physicians over authorities who might pressure them to lower standards of medical care. In 1847, the American Medical Association was the first national professional society anywhere to adopt Percival's rules and call them a "code of ethics."

# Growth and Development of Codes in the Social Sciences

The American Psychological Association published the first social science code in 1953, following the now-familiar practice of convening a committee, gathering descriptions of ethical dilemmas encountered by members, and developing, through consensus, appropriate rules. Currently, there are codes of ethics for every branch of social science, as well as for subareas within them, such as public opinion research, and clinical hypnosis. Changes within society (e.g., emphasis on privacy), regulations (e.g., institutional review boards), professional roles, and research topics require frequent review and revision of codes. Typically, a professional association's ethics committee publishes articles describing emerging issues, suggests approaches to resolving them, and seeks membership input. Drafts of the emerging code are revised and published until membership consensus is reached.

## Using Codes

Because codes of ethics are created in response to anticipated ethical conflicts, they are best understood and interpreted in the context of real-life ethical ambiguity. Case studies of ethical dilemmas are effective instructional tools for teaching the use of codes and are now an important part of each discipline's professional literature.

A voluminous literature on codes of ethics now exists. Collections of codes, annotated bibliographies, casebooks, research guidelines, methodology integrating tenets of valid research and ethics, as well as guidance in authoring codes and teaching their use, can be found at the URL of the Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology (<http://www.iit.edu/departments/csep/PublicWWW/codes/>). The archives on codes of ethics, including their history, construction, use, and examples across the professions, are housed at the same Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions.

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