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Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology

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Code of Ethics

Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology

The purpose of this Code is to offer some guidance to researchers in the field of criminology in keeping with the aims of the Society to value and promote the highest ethical standards in criminological research. The Code of Practice is intended to promote and support good practice. Members should read the Code in the light of any other Professional Ethical Guidelines or Codes of Practice to which they are subject, including those issued by individual academic institutions and by the ESRC (see Further Information section below).

The guidelines do not provide a prescription for the resolution of choices or dilemmas surrounding professional conduct in specific circumstances. They provide a framework of principles to assist the choices and decisions which have to be made also with regard to the principles, values and interests of all those involved in a particular situation. Membership of the British Society of Criminology is taken to imply acceptance of these general principles and the need to be aware of ethical issues and issues regarding professional conduct that may arise in people's work.

The British Society of Criminology's general principle is that researchers should ensure that research is undertaken to the highest possible methodological standard and the highest quality in order that maximum possible knowledge and benefits accrue to society.

1. General Responsibilities

Researchers in the field of criminology should endeavour to:

i) advance knowledge about criminological issues;

ii) identify and seek to ameliorate factors which restrict the development of their professional competence and integrity;

iii) seek appropriate experience or training to improve their professional competence, and identify and deal with any factors which threaten to restrict their professional integrity;

iv) refrain from laying claim, directly or indirectly, to expertise in areas of criminology which they do not have;

v) take all reasonable steps to ensure that their qualifications, capabilities or views are not misrepresented by others;

vi) correct any misrepresentations and adopt the highest standards in all their professional relationships with institutions and colleagues whatever their status;

vii) respect their various responsibilities as outlined in the rest of this document;
viii) keep up to date with ethical and methodological issues in the field, for example by

reading research monographs and participating in training events (see Further Information section below);

ix) check the reliability of their sources of information, in particular when using the internet.

2. Responsibilities of Researchers Towards the Discipline of Criminology

Researchers have a general duty to promote the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, to protect intellectual and professional freedom, and therefore to promote a working environment and professional relationships conducive to these. More specifically, researchers should promote free and independent inquiry into criminological matters and unrestricted dissemination of criminological knowledge. As part of this, researchers should endeavour to avoid contractual conditions that limit academic integrity or freedom. Researchers should endeavour to ensure that the methodology employed and the research findings are open for discussion and peer review.

3. Researchers' Responsibilities to Colleagues

Researchers should:

i) recognise fully the contribution to the research of junior colleagues and avoid exploitation of them. (For example, reports and publications emanating from research should follow the convention of listing contributors in alphabetical order unless one has contributed more than the other(s));

ii) actively promote the professional development of research staff by ensuring that staff receive the appropriate training and support and protection in research environments which may jeopardise their physical and/or emotional well-being;

iii) not claim work of others as their own; the use of others' ideas and research materials should be cited at all times, whatever their status and regardless of the status of the ideas or materials (e.g. even if in draft form);

iv) promote equal opportunity in all aspects of their professional work and actively seek to avoid discriminatory behaviour. This includes a moral obligation to challenge stereotypes and negative attitudes based on prejudice. It also includes an obligation to avoid over-generalising on the basis of limited data, and to beware of the dangers of failing to reflect the experience of certain groups, or contributing to the over-researching of certain groups within the population.

4. Researchers' Responsibilities towards Research Participants

Researchers should:

i) recognise that they have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of an individual participating in research is not adversely affected by participation in the research. Researchers should strive to protect the rights

of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy. Researchers should consider carefully the possibility that the research experience may be a disturbing one, particularly for those who are vulnerable by virtue of factors such as age, social status, or powerlessness and should seek to minimise such disturbances. Researchers should also consider whether or not it is appropriate to offer information about support services (e.g. leaflets about relevant self-help groups);

ii) be sympathetic to the constraints on organisations participating in research and not inhibit their functioning by imposing any unnecessary burdens on them;

iii)base research on the freely given informed consent of those studied in all but exceptional circumstances. (Exceptional in this context relates to exceptional importance of the topic rather than difficulty of gaining access). Informed consent implies a responsibility on the part of the researchers to explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how any research findings are to be disseminated. Researchers should also make clear that participants have the right to refuse permission or withdraw from involvement in research whenever and for whatever reason they wish. Participants' consent should be informed, voluntary and continuing, and researchers need to check that this is the case. Research participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason without adverse consequences. Research participants should be informed about how far they will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality. Researchers should pay special attention to these matters when participation is sought from children, young, or vulnerable people, including consideration of the need for additional consent from an adult responsible for the child at the time participation is sought. It is not considered appropriate to assume that penal and care institutions can give informed consent on research on young people's behalf. The young people themselves must be consulted. Furthermore, researchers should give regard for issues of child protection and make provision for the disclosure of abuse. Researchers should consider the possibility of discussing research findings with participants and those who are the subject of the research;

iv) where there is a likelihood that identifiable data may be shared with other researchers, the potential uses to which the data might be put should be discussed with research participants. Research participants should be informed if data are likely to be placed in archives, including computer archives. Researchers should not breach the 'duty of confidentiality' and not pass on identifiable data to third parties without participants' consent. Researchers should also note that they should work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as intellectual property (including copyright, trademark, patents), privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights. Offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law: researchers should therefore consider the circumstances in which they might be required to divulge information to legal or other authorities, and make such circumstances clear to participants when seeking their informed consent;

v) researchers should be aware, when conducting research via the Internet, of the particular problems that may arise when engaging in this medium. Researchers should not only be aware of the relevant areas of law in the jurisdictions that they cover but

they should also be aware of the rules of conduct of their Internet Service Provider (including JANET - Joint Academic Network). When conducting Internet research, the researcher should be aware of the boundaries between the public and the private domains, and also any legal and cultural differences across jurisdictions. Where research might prejudice the legitimate rights of respondents, researchers should obtain informed consent from them, honour assurances of confidentiality, and ensure the security of data transmission. They should exercise particular care and consideration when engaging with children and vulnerable people in Internet research;

vi) researchers should be aware of the additional difficulties that can occur when undertaking comparative or cross-national research, involving different jurisdictions where codes of practice are likely to differ.

5. Relationships with Sponsors

Researchers should:

i) seek to maintain good relationships with all funding and professional agencies in order to achieve the aim of advancing knowledge about criminological issues and to avoid bringing the wider criminological community into disrepute with these agencies. In particular, researchers should seek to avoid damaging confrontations with funding agencies and the participants of research which may reduce research possibilities for other researchers;

ii) seek to clarify in advance the respective obligations of funders and researchers and their institutions and encourage written agreements wherever possible. They should recognise their obligations to funders whether contractually defined or only the subject of informal or unwritten agreements .They should attempt to complete research projects to the best of their ability within contractual or unwritten agreements. Researchers have a responsibility to notify the sponsor/funder of any proposed departure from the terms of reference;

iii) seek to avoid contractual/financial arrangements which emphasise speed and economy at the expense of good quality research and they should seek to avoid restrictions on their freedom to disseminate research findings . In turn, it is hoped that funding bodies/sponsors will recognise that intellectual and professional freedom is of paramount importance and that they will seek to ensure that the dissemination of research findings is not unnecessarily delayed or obstructed because of considerations unrelated to the quality of the research.

6. Further Information

When considering ethical issues members of the Society engaged in criminological research may find useful the detailed guidance on the Data Protection Act, Internet research and research involving children and young people formulated by the Market Research Society, www.marketresearch.org.uk

The Social Research Association (SRA) has produced: A Code of Practice for the Safety of

Social Researchers and the SRA's Ethical Guidelines contain an extensive bibliography of papers and reports on ethics in social research.

For further information on codes of ethics, data sharing, confidentiality, risk and trust profiles for individuals using public service data sources, and privacy and self-disclosure, please see: ***Losing Data, Keeping Trust*** by Arild Foss which is available at the following web address and is hosted by the ESRC.

ESRC website at: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

The EU Code of Ethics for Socio-Economic Research can be accessed at:
www.respectproject.org/ethics/guideines.php

Other national societies' codes of ethics can be accessed as follows:
Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology.
www.anzsoc.org/society/codeOfEthics.html

7. Frequently Asked Questions

Note: these FAQs are intended to provoke thought and debate: the answers given are not to be taken as definitive.

Q1: "One of my interviewees in prison has told me about getting away with various offences. He told me he is in prison for three burglaries, but there are several other offences that the police don't know about. What should I do?"
A1: It should have been made clear to participants in the research at the outset what the limits of confidentiality for those involved in the study were: see sections 4iii and 4iv of the Code of Ethics. Research in sensitive settings such as prisons is particularly likely to throw up issues of this kind.

Q2: "I've been doing some focus group discussions with school children about their views on crime and punishment. In a small group of ten year olds one day, they started talking about a man called John who gives them sweets at the gate of the school. There was a lot of hushing and shushing and exchanged glances at this point, and it became clear that I was being told something I wasn't meant to hear because of their parents. What should I do?"

A2: The welfare of vulnerable participants in research, such as children, overrides other concerns. See sections 4i and 4iii of the Code of Ethics. Research with children should only be undertaken by people who have themselves been cleared for the purpose by the Criminal Records Bureau. If research uncovers suspected child abuse, this must be disclosed to the proper authorities for investigation. In this case, the suspicion is vague but valid: the researcher should inform a senior staff member at the school of what was said.

Q3: "I've got piles of interview data for my PhD but nowhere to keep the material. I share an office with five others and have two drawers in a filing cabinet but they key has been lost. What am I meant to do with all the data, and does my department have an obligation to help me?"

A3: PhD students should receive proper training on data protection and universities should make appropriate provision for confidential storage of data (see sections 1iii, 1viii, 4i and 4iv of the Code of Ethics).

Q4: "I've just interviewed someone who was very depressed, and I'm worried that they may harm themselves."

A4: Where criminologists undertake research on sensitive topics, they may need to consider providing information about sources of appropriate support to research participants who may become distressed by the research encounter (see section 4i of the Code of Ethics). However, whether it is appropriate to disclose information about potential self harm by research participants to third parties is a complex issue, and the decision will depend upon the circumstances of the case. It cannot be assumed that the person concerned would want their mental condition discussed with third parties.

Q5: "I'm a junior member of a large research group. I wrote the literature review for an article which the head of the group has submitted to a journal, but he has submitted it only under his own name. What can I do?"

If the senior researcher is a member of BSC, he is covered by this Code of Ethics. If not, the junior team member is in a very vulnerable position. If the matter cannot be resolved by informal discussion, the junior person needs independent advice in order to decide whether it is in her/his interests to pursue the matter formally (see sections 3i and 3iii of the Code of Ethics).

The BSC Code of Ethics was revised by Colin Dunnighan, Loraine Gelsthorpe, Mike Rowe, Azrini Wahidin, Brian Williams (Chair) and Kate Williams, February 2006. We also wish to acknowledge the help of Mark Israel.

The Ethics Committee of the British Society of Criminology currently includes: Mark Israel (Flinders University), Jo Phoenix (Durham University), Azrini Wahidin (Queens University Belfast), Anthony Goodman (Middlesex University) and is chaired by Loraine Gelsthorpe (University of Cambridge). Members of the Committee offer an advisory service to all members of the BSC regarding ethical issues. Not withstanding members' commitments to any other professional and institutional codes of practice, the Committee also serves to review and comment upon research proposals. We are particularly keen to assist postgraduate students in this regard.

Contact Details:

Details of the British Society of Criminology's own regular training events and conferences on research ethics and related issues can be obtained from this website or from the Society's office on 07896 347183.

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