

Towards an ethical use of animals

OVER 20 years ago, the Society published its first guidance on the use of animals in psychology, in the form of a working party report. That working party grew into the Society's Standing Advisory Committee on Standards for Psychological Research and Teaching Involving Animals (SACSPRATIA), which in due course produced expanded guidelines on the use of animals in psychological research (BPS Scientific Affairs Board, 1985). These guidelines were worked out in collaboration with the Experimental Psychology Society (EPS), who also published them (see Boakes, 1986). Ever since they have served as standing advice to the members of both Societies and to everyone submitting papers concerning animals to either Society's journals.

Fifteen years further on, we have a different Act of Parliament governing animal research in the UK — the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; we have a greatly changed regulatory framework, with local ethical review committees involving non-animal users and non-scientists in all universities and research laboratories; we have much clearer professional standards for all psychological work, and more penalties within the Society for those who fall short of them; and we have a very different set of debates about animal welfare, both within psychology and in the wider community — arguably with less heat but more light being generated.

Another change is that the Society has replaced the almost impossibly titled SACSPRATIA with a renewed and much more active Standing Advisory Committee on the Welfare of Animals in Psychology (SACWAP). One of the tasks SACWAP set itself a few years ago was to make a thorough revision of the Society's guidance on working with animals.

Once again this task has been completed in collaboration with the EPS. The new guidelines have been prepared in the light of the Society's new policy



STEPHEN E. G. LEA introduces the Society's new guidelines for psychologists working with animals.

statement on the use of animals in psychology, which was approved by Council in 1998 and published in *Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles & Guidelines* (BPS, 1998).

The new guidelines have now been approved by the Society's Scientific Affairs Board and Council and by the EPS committee. They will be published in Section B of the *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, which carries more reports on research on animal psychology than any other UK psychological journal. They will also be available as a separate publication from the Society's office, and they are included in the current Code of Conduct booklet (BPS, 2000)

Changing circumstances

This article aims to give a brief introduction to the new guidelines, stressing the ways they have had to change to take account of new circumstances. It is intended both for members who are currently working with animals (who will need to get hold of the new guidelines and look at them carefully — failure to observe them could be considered professional misconduct) and for members generally, who may like to know what position the Society is taking on these sometimes controversial matters.

One of the biggest changes since the last guidelines is that we have had to try to cover a wider range of psychological activities. The old guidelines were largely restricted to research use of animals, though the working party report that preceded them also dealt with teaching. Now we also have to consider

psychologists who use animals as therapy assistants, or who attempt therapy on psychologically disturbed animals, as well as colleagues who may be involved in the use of animals for commercial purposes, such as advertising. These new uses only get a toehold in the new guidelines, but we have tried to prepare for the way some of them look like expanding in the near future — especially so-called 'pet therapy'.

Legal obligations

Both the Society and the EPS require their members to know the laws covering animal use in the country where their work is done. Authors submitting research for publication in the journals of either Society have to confirm that they have adhered to such laws and to the guidelines. This is one of the best ways in which societies like ours can exert a positive influence on animal welfare, and an influence that can extend beyond this country.

UK legislation regulates all scientific procedures that might cause an animal 'pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm'. The first aim should be to avoid such procedures altogether by using alternative experimental designs or manipulations. But where that cannot be done, researchers must convince themselves, a local ethical review committee (which includes lay people and a vet as well as scientists), and the Home Office that the costs to the animal are outweighed by the likely benefits of the proposed programme of work.

Whatever procedures are used, any adverse effects on animals must be recognised and assessed, and immediate action taken to end them if they go beyond

what has been foreseen. All of these are legal requirements. In addition, the Society expects that when reporting research in scientific journals or otherwise, researchers must always be prepared to identify any costs to the animals involved and justify them in terms of the scientific benefit of the work.

Our guidelines expect psychologists to make an intelligent choice of animal to study — informed by a knowledge of both the species' natural history and the individual animal's previous experience, and by what they mean for its welfare and the amount it is likely to suffer in any experimental use. We also expect psychologists to use alternatives, such as computer simulation, wherever that can appropriately be done. UK legislation requires researchers to use the minimum number of animals that will achieve their research goals. Our guidelines give some advice on how this can best be achieved. Almost all animals used by psychologists now need to come through legally recognised sources, of either laboratory or wild animals.

Best practice

The longest section of the new guidelines gives specific advice about many of the procedures that psychologists use with animals. These include: reward, deprivation and aversive stimulation; isolation and crowding; aggression and predation; fieldwork; and anaesthesia, analgesia and euthanasia. In every case we are concerned that the choice of procedure should be made intelligently, in the light of the immense amount we now know about the natural behaviour and psychological processes of many of the species of animal concerned.

Of course, it is not only during experiments that animal welfare can be compromised. European and UK legislation mean that the housing conditions and husbandry practices for all animals used for scientific purposes must reach the same high standards, whether or not they are involved in procedures that could cause pain or distress. For example, the normal maintenance of all captive animals should incorporate, as much as possible, aspects of the natural living conditions deemed important to welfare and survival, and should take account of their natural responses to husbandry operations.

Companions should be provided for social animals where possible, providing that this does not lead to suffering or injury. The housing regime should provide

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The guidelines include treatment of animals in behaviour therapy for people with phobias

adequate exercise and cognitive stimulation. And investigators need to think how their animals will see the humans who look after them — will they respond to them as conspecifics, predators or symbionts? Animal care staff need to be trained in the principles of animal psychology.

There are very tight controls on what can be done with animals after they have served in legally regulated procedures. These are designed to stop animals being used repeatedly in painful experiments. And when animals must be killed, it has to be done using approved methods, by people who have been trained to minimise any suffering involved.

Animals in teaching

When animals are used for teaching purposes, the guidelines stress the need to discuss with students the ethical issues involved in the use of animals in psychology. Students should be encouraged to form their own ethical assessments and must not be required to carry out any experimental manipulation that they judge to be inappropriate.

Students are not allowed to carry out procedures that can cause pain or distress. In some circumstances, though, they can observe procedures being carried out for research purposes; and senior students might, during projects for example, work with animals that had undergone such procedures.

When observing animals in their natural habitat, students must not be allowed to manipulate either the animals or the habitat. Research students are in a special category, and the guidelines explain how the current legislation regulates their work.

Animals in therapy

Various animal species are currently used by psychologists as aides or adjuncts to therapy: for example, pet dogs used as 'co-therapists'; horses used for riding by disabled children; companion animals used in visiting schemes in hospitals or hospices;

pets kept within prisons as part of rehabilitation programmes; and animals such as spiders and snakes used in behaviour therapy for the treatment of specific animal phobias. The guidelines stress that in all these cases, considerations concerning the general care and welfare of therapeutic animals are similar to those outlined for experimental animals.

In addition, the individual temperament and training of the animals needs to be appropriate (e.g. a hospital-visiting dog should be calm, placid and sociable with people), and contact between the therapeutic animal and client or patient needs to be monitored at all times — therapeutic interactions, especially with children, can be very demanding and tiring for an animal.

Professional responsibility

The guidelines include an extensive list of references, and addresses of useful organisations, with different viewpoints about animal use. It is a professional responsibility on all psychologists working with animals to inform themselves about the debate on the desirability of animal work; we hope that this article will help all our colleagues be aware of the steps the Society is taking to ensure that standards are high. SACWAP's development plan ensures that the guidelines will be reconsidered regularly in the future, so that the Society's advice to members is kept up to date as new developments emerge.

References

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