



COMETS
CNRS Ethics Committee

OPINION n°2007-18

« ETHICS AND HUMAN BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES »

Approved at plenary session of 23 february 2007



SUMMARY

1. Knowledge of human behaviour, in all its forms, is an essential element in understanding human beings and our place among other living beings.

2. Over time, in a desire for scientific understanding, a number of approaches have been developed in order to construct this knowledge on solid foundations and analyses supported by research. The ethological approach (behaviour dependent on instinct), the behaviourist approach (direct relationship between behaviour and external stimuli), the cognitivist approach (focused on mental states) and psychoanalytical approach (focused on the individual's subjectivity) have in turn been developed and now overlap.

3. This research stands at a point of tension between two dimensions of the human being: behaviour from a deterministic stance on the one hand, and an individual's free will and inalienable rights on the other. Both the research itself and its results have repercussions that go beyond the laboratory: by shaping individual and collective attitudes to societal issues such as education, social protection, the treatment of behavioural disorders and care for the mentally ill, it can become a means of governance and a power issue.

Each approach thus raises its own ethical issues, whether in the social field and its organisation, with regard to individuals (eugenics, meliorism, etc.); by the naturalisation of behaviour (action on cerebral mechanisms, neuro-marketing); or during the treatment of behavioural disorders.

4. This inventory underlines the importance of ethical deliberations that are sufficiently comprehensive to encourage vigilance with regard to research closely affecting the individual, yet sufficiently detailed to provide researchers with guidelines for their daily practices.

5. The legal framework is set by the Act of 20 December 1988 on "The protection of persons involved in biomedical research", which is applicable to research on human behaviour. However, this research also includes specific features that the current law does not necessarily take into account. Sometimes framed by codes of conduct respecting the fundamental principles — freedom, physical integrity, equity — of respect for persons, research can also take place without adequate ethical considerations. It is therefore necessary to go beyond the legal framework.

6. Following this first stage of reflection, the committee proposes four recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Mental well-being and its corollary, mental risk, are poorly defined notions that should be the subject of specific deliberations by the CNRS's scientific bodies. These deliberations should then be reflected in experimental practice in the form of guidelines for researchers.

Recommendation 2. *Set up a science and technology watch committee on developments in behavioural sciences.* Composed of scientists and individuals from civil society, including industry, this group should keep abreast of developments in behavioural sciences in relation to the various disciplines that contribute to them, and try to foresee their ethical impact. It should operate under the supervision of the Management Board and in close collaboration with COMETS, the CNRS Ethics Committee.

Recommendation 3. *Organise continuous training in the ethics of behavioural sciences and techniques,* supplementing that of conventional education. This training should cover the historical, philosophical and ethical aspects of behavioural sciences, paying particular attention to the comparison of points of view. The CNRS should strongly encourage researchers and doctoral students to follow these courses.

Recommendation 4. Dialogue with the public. This dialogue should address both the expected progress in our knowledge of humans and their inner workings and the risks stemming from the misuse of the findings — or what are presented as the findings — of behavioural science research. The scientific community itself could and should take the initiative to develop this dialogue through meetings with the public.

