



College of  
**Policing**

# **The impact of codes of ethics on behaviour**

A rapid evidence assessment

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# The impact of codes of ethics

Overall, evidence on the impact of codes of ethics on behaviour from a rapid review was found to be consistent and broadly positive. Laboratory and field experiments reviewed showed codes can encourage people to behave with integrity. While there are no studies from a policing context, issues were identified that can potentially impact on the success of a code: the importance of people actively stating they will abide by a code; the importance of fairness and role-modelling by senior figures; and providing regular follow-up especially for anyone who has been found to have committed a minor breach of the code. There is scope for further testing given many of the studies were conducted in simulated environments, with non-police personnel, using a variety of different types of ethical guideline.

## Introduction

In support of its Integrity Programme, the College has commissioned a review of the research literature to highlight the factors associated with wrongdoing in police and other organisations, and identify a range of effective and promising interventions aimed at prevention (McDowall et al. forthcoming). To supplement that broader review of the intervention evidence, the College also carried out a less exhaustive literature search to identify experimental studies that have specifically examined the impact of codes of ethics on professional conduct. This small scale and narrowly focused review was carried out over a short timescale to inform the development and implementation of the Code of Ethics for the policing profession of England and Wales.

Despite its restricted and time limited nature, the review used transparent and explicit criteria to identify, sift and draw together the findings from relevant research in order to reduce bias in the selection and reporting of studies. The use of systematic principles also enables the process to be replicated in the future, and should enable the review's limitations to be easily identified. The methods used in the review are briefly set out in Appendix A (page 7).

Overall, 629 studies were initially found to have been published since 1990 in peer-reviewed, English language journals. These studies were then sifted using a series of criteria. For studies to be included in the review, they had to:

- be empirical (purely theoretical papers or opinion pieces were excluded);
- use an experimental or quasi-experimental research design; and
- evaluate the effectiveness of a code of ethics or conduct, formal set of ethical guidelines or similar on behaviour.

Despite the relatively large number of initial studies identified, only nine passed the sift criteria. Overall, the literature fell into two broad categories: psychological lab experiments; and field experiments (see Appendix B, page 8 for details). The findings of these studies are reported below. Studies using other research methods – which may have contained useful and relevant insights – were deliberately excluded from the review as they would not enable cause-and-effect statements to be made.

## Results

### Laboratory experiments

Seven psychological studies were identified that met the inclusion criteria. These studies tended to place research participants in a variety of simulated situations where there was an

opportunity for them behave unethically (e.g. to lie or steal) in order to see what effect a code of ethics might have on behaviour. While these studies provide potentially useful insights, we should be cautious about generalizing their impact to the 'real world' because the research settings were necessarily artificial, and did not directly relate to police work. For example, there would have been no consequences for people who acted unethically in the 'safe' environment of the laboratory. However, the aims of the studies were often hidden from the research participants in order to encourage them to act in a more naturalistic way.

- **The impact of codes on behaviour** – Davidson and Stevens (2013) placed 124 students in a simulation which required them to make a series of anonymous financial transactions with their peers involving real money. Importantly, the scenario provided participants with an opportunity for embezzlement. Beforehand, the students were randomly assigned to one of three groups:
  - Those in group one were asked to read a code of ethics.
  - Those in group two had to read a code and then certify that they agreed to abide by the code (by ticking a box on an online form).
  - Those in the group three – the control group – received no guidance.

Students in all groups were found to embezzle money, increasingly so with each subsequent transaction. On average, however participants in group two – who had agreed to follow the code – were least likely to embezzle funds. Those who received a code without having to certify themselves embezzled less than those in the control group, but by a smaller margin.

Martinov-Bennie et al. (2008) carried out an experiment with 86 auditors to test the effect of different ethical environments on the quality of their judgements in an accountancy context. The different environments varied according to the presence and reinforcement of a code of conduct. This study results suggested that audit managers were more likely to make ethical decisions in the presence of a code. They were also more likely to behave more positively than student auditors, which the authors speculated was a result of the managers having internalised the code.

- **The effects of behavioural 'nudges'** – In Sheppard and Cushman's (2010) lab experiment, 213 study participants were given a \$10 'thank you' payment for taking part and then asked how much of their payment they wanted to donate to a registered charity. Beforehand, the law students who were taking part in experiment were given – at random – different types of ethical guidelines about how people in their profession were expected to behave (in terms of donating to charity). Everyone was given some form of ethical code, though they differed in terms of how they were worded. There were broadly four different guidance options: vague and mandatory; vague and non-mandatory; explicit and mandatory; and explicit and non-mandatory. The students who were given the explicit mandatory code were significantly more likely to donate some of the money than those in other groups, but were less likely to donate generous amounts. They tended to make the recommended donation. Those given non-specific, non-mandatory guidance were, by comparison, more likely to give generously, but a higher number also gave nothing.
- **How the 'framing' of codes affects decision-making** – Herron and Gilbertson (2004) tested how 69 accountants would respond to differently worded codes of ethics. Before the study, the participants were assessed to find out how they tended to make decisions. They were then given – at random – either a code of ethics that was framed in terms of specific rules, or a code framed around broad principles.<sup>1</sup> Afterwards, in a

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<sup>1</sup> The study did not include a control group where no code of ethics was given.

simulated office environment, the accountants were asked whether they would take on potentially unethical or compromising work. The results showed that codes were more likely to encourage ethical behaviour when there was consistency between how the code was framed and how people made decisions. In other words, participants who made rule-based decisions were more likely to decline unethical work if they were given a rule-based code. The same was also found with those who made principle-based decisions and principle-based codes. Another experiment, in a simulated business setting, tested codes that varied by the 'abstract' character of their wording (Rabl 2011). This study found that the level of abstractness made no difference, though tentatively suggested concrete wording might be better.

- **The influence of supervisors on compliance with codes** – Umphress et al. (2009) carried out an experiment to test how fair treatment by a supervisor and a code of ethics would affect the behaviour of 126 students. The experiment showed that students who were treated fairly by their supervisors were more likely to lie to help them, while those who were unfairly treated were more likely to steal from them.<sup>2</sup> The study also looked at whether the presence of a code of ethics would influence these relationships. While the code did not increase lying, it was found to increase the chance that someone treated unfairly would steal from their supervisor. The authors speculated that the introduction of a code changed the students' expectations about how they should be treated by supervisors. This study highlighted the importance of fair treatment within organisations, and that behaviour by senior figures perceived to be inconsistent with a code could have a detrimental effect. This study, therefore, highlighted the need to take into account contextual factors when introducing a code and the risks posed by leaders who fail to act as good role-models.
- **Persistence in the influence of codes** – Four different experiments, involving 546 university students, indicated that participants who had cheated on a test for money were less able to remember a code of ethics they had previously been asked to memorise (Shu and Gino 2012). Follow-up tests suggested that people suffered from 'moral forgetfulness' as a result of breaking the rules. This study might, therefore, highlight the need for codes to be reinforced at regular intervals and for follow-up support to be targeted at anyone who has been found to have committed a minor breach of the code.

## Field experiments

Two field studies were found that looked at the impact of codes a 'real world' setting. However, they focused on healthcare professionals in South East Asia, so their findings may not translate to policing in the UK.

- The impact of a behavioural 'caring' code was tested in a randomised control trial involving 480 student nurses in Taiwan (Lee-Hsieh et al. 2005). The treatment group students, who had the code included in their curriculum and were given an *aide memoire* of the code, were rated as more empathetic, caring and competent by their patients and supervisors than those in the control group. The study provides strong evidence of impact on both behaviour and public experience as the study design means that the difference in outcomes for the treatment and control groups can be directly attributed to the code.
- A quasi-experimental study carried out in Singapore evaluated the impact of a code of ethics and related ethics training on the attitudes of 283 medical students (Chin et al.

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<sup>2</sup> These findings are broadly consistent with Bradford et al.'s (2013) work on 'hard' and 'soft' compliance in policing.

2011). Using a before/after matched cohort design, the study found that students were significantly more likely to say it was unacceptable to lie to patients or withhold information from them if they received the intervention. Those who received the training tended to be more interested in the regulation of their profession, and show greater knowledge of existing legislation and about the ethical issues that could affect their patients. They were also more positive and confident about ethics in general compared to those in the control group.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, evidence on the impact of codes of ethics on behaviour from a rapid review was found to be consistent and broadly positive. Laboratory and field experiments reviewed showed codes can encourage people to behave with integrity. While there are no studies from a policing context, issues were identified that can potentially impact on the success of a code: the importance of people actively stating they will abide by a code; the importance of fairness and role-modelling by senior figures; and providing regular follow-up especially for anyone who has been found to have committed a minor breach of the code. There is scope for further testing given many of the studies were conducted in simulated environments, with non-police personnel, using a variety of different types of ethical guideline.

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# Appendix A. Review methods

Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs) are a type of literature review which apply criteria in a systematic way to search for, sift and synthesise research on a particular topic to reduce bias in the selection and reporting of studies. REAs use the same transparent and replicable methods as full systematic reviews, but make concessions to the breadth or depth of the process in order to deliver results more quickly. REAs typically limit: the number of databases searched; the coverage of the search terms used; and/or the type and age of the literature reviewed. These limitations are then clearly outlined. The method used in this REA is set out briefly below for transparency and to enable the process to be replicated in the future.

## Search terms

The search strategy was developed and implemented with the National Police Library. A search strategy was used using synonyms and antonyms for following three tiers:

1. Integrity / (un)ethical behaviour (as the outcome measure in the study);
2. Codes of ethics or similar (as the intervention tested in the study); and
3. The research design (the type of evaluation study).

Repeated test and pilot searches resulted in the following search term:

1. Integrity OR Ethic\* OR Unethical OR Misconduct OR Complaint\* OR Corrupt\* OR Trust;  
AND
2. Code\* AND (Ethic\* or Conduct\* or Practice\*); AND
3. Experiment\* OR Trial\* OR 'Systematic review' OR 'Rapid evidence assessment' OR REA  
OR RCT OR 'randomised controlled trial'

## Databases

The following literature databases were searched: Web of Knowledge; Heritage; ProQuest; Emerald; and the National Police Library.

## Languages and publication type

Searches were limited to articles published since 1990 in English language, peer reviewed journals accessible online or via request from the British Library.

## Sift criteria

Overall, 629 studies were initially found. The abstracts for these studies were then manually sifted using a series of criteria. For studies to be included in the review, they had to:

- be empirical (purely theoretical papers or opinion pieces were excluded);
- use an experimental or quasi-experimental research design to enable causal statements about impact to be made; and
- evaluate the effectiveness of a code of ethics or conduct, formal set of ethical guidelines, or similar, on behaviour within a professional setting.

A large number of studies were found that discussed codes of ethics from a theoretical perspective, but did not measure attitude or behaviour change, and so were excluded at the sift stage. A large number of irrelevant studies were also returned because terms for 'integrity' were used in other ways by other disciplines (e.g. 'structural integrity' and 'file corruption').

# Appendix B. Studies included in the review

Table B1. An overview of the studies included in the review

Study	Location	Sample size	Setting (subjects)	Allocation	Test conditions	Key Findings
<b>Lab experiments</b>						
Davidson and Stevens (2013)	USA	124	Financial (students)	Random	Allocated to different groups required to: read a code; or read and 'sign up' to a code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students embezzled funds in all conditions</li> <li>Those least likely to embezzle funds certified themselves again the code</li> <li>Those most likely to embezzle funds were not given a code to read</li> </ul>
Herron and Gilbertson (2004)	USA	69	Financial (accountants)	Random	Allocated differently worded ethical guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Codes has a positive impact when there was consistency between their wording and how people reasoned</li> <li>Those who tended to reason using rules were more likely to decline unethical work when given a rules-based code</li> <li>Those who tended to reason using principles were more likely to do the same when given a principles-based code</li> </ul>
Martinov-Bennie and Pflugrath (2009)	USA	86	Financial (auditor managers and students)	Random	Allocated to different work environments, varying by the presence and reinforcement of a code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Audit managers were positively affected when exposed to a code</li> <li>They were also more likely to behave positively than students auditors</li> </ul>
Rabl (2011)	Germany	196	N/A (business and other students)	Random	Allocated differently worded ethical guidelines	No difference was found between the effect of 'concrete' and 'abstractly' worded codes, though there was some suggestion concrete wording was more likely to be internalised.

Sheppard and Cushman (2010)	USA	213	Legal (students)	Random	Allocated different types of ethical guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with explicit, mandatory guidelines were more likely to donate to charity, but tended to give the minimum recommended amount</li> <li>Students with vaguer, non-mandatory guidelines were more likely to donate nothing, but gave more generously when they did so</li> </ul>
Shu and Gino (2012)	USA	546	N/A (students and university staff)	Random	Allocated code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students who cheated in a test were more likely to have forgotten the contents of a code they had previously been asked to memorise</li> </ul>
Umphress et al. (2009)	USA	126	N/A (students)	Random	Allocated to different types of supervisor – who would treat them fairly or unfairly – to test the effect of a code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Without a code, students treated fairly by a supervisor were more likely to lie to help them, while those treated unfairly were more likely to steal from them</li> <li>With a code, fairly treated students were no more likely to lie, while those treated unfairly were even more likely to steal</li> <li>The code may have changed student expectations, particularly if on the end of behaviour inconsistent with the code</li> </ul>
<b>Field experiments</b>						
Chin et al. (2011)	Singapore	283	Medical (students)	Non-random, matched cohort design	Allocated code, <i>aide memoire</i> and revised training course	Students in the treatment group were more likely to find deception unacceptable, and had greater knowledge of and confidence around ethical issues, relative to those in the comparison group
Lee-Hsieh et al. (2005)	Taiwan	480	Nursing (students)	Random	Allocated code and revised training course	Student in the treatment group were more likely to be rated as empathetic, caring and competent by patients and supervisors than those in the control group