

Discuss ethical guidelines for psychologists and illustrate with research examples.

Ethics has been defined as “a branch of philosophy that deals with thinking about morality, moral problems, and judgements of proper conduct” (Frankena, 1973), indicating the importance of the moral obligations of the researcher, or indeed therapist, to the participant, or patient. Sinclair *et al.* (1966) observe that the concept of an ethical approach is “almost as old as recorded history, with the Hippocratic oath (written about 400 BC) the first professional generated code of ethics.”

When controversial research is discussed, it is regularly assumed that the poorly treated subjects are animals. While this is frequently the case, throughout the history of psychology there have been notable examples of experiments involving human participants who have been maltreated (while there are guidelines regarding the treatment of animals, they are beyond the scope of this essay). The need to have some sort of guidelines to protect research subjects was recognised in the 1970s, but it was not until 1990 that the British Psychological Society first published a set of ethical guidelines. During the 1960s the ethical aspect of research was barely considered, and what would today be treated as breaches of the guidelines were, at the time, accepted as the way in which research was conducted. Kimmel (1998) tries to explain this lack of understanding of ethical practices as being due to the fact that discussions on the matter were “taken as an indication that one had not yet outgrown a pre-scientific nature, bringing into the scientific domain issues that did not belong there”.

Within the confines of a research experiment, the participant is usually part of a situation almost wholly under the control of the researcher. In such an environment there is often no opportunity for the individual to react in any way other than that dictated by the situation and experimenter. To ensure that the situation does not generate discomfort for the subject, the researcher has to be able to appreciate every aspect of the experiment from more than just their own perspective. Today, a failure to recognise any elements of the experimental design that may cause any form of distress to the participants could lead to the research being described as ethically questionable. Indeed, the essence of the BPS’s guidelines is given to be that

“the investigation should be considered from the standpoint of all participants: foreseeable threats to the psychological well being, health, values, or dignity should be eliminated.” (BPS, 1990).

The first, most important, guideline refers to the participant’s right of voluntary informed consent. This means that as far as possible, the researcher should gain the consent of the individuals once they have had explained to them everything that they will be expected to do, and the purpose of the experiment. However, this fundamental principle does give rise to several problems. For example, in observational research, it must firstly be established whether the observation is to be executed overtly (where no attempt is made to conceal the fact that participants are being observed), or covertly (where the observers are concealed). Both types of observational methods create problems in how to gain the informed consent of the participants: if the research is executed in a controlled environment, such as the laboratory, it is easy to conform to the guidelines. If the situation is not controlled within the scope of the research, such as observing behaviour in a shopping centre, there are ethical issues that need to be resolved before the research can begin. In such a public place, it would be impossible to gain the consent of everyone involved. This is compounded if the observation is covert, as the participants cannot, by definition, be informed they are being observed. Dyer (1995) suggests that the way around this dilemma is to “recognise that there is a distinction [...] between observing behaviour in public places [...] as opposed to private environments [...] where behaviour can normally be viewed by a small number of others”. This leads to the conclusion that in public where one’s behaviour is open to scrutiny there “can be no objection to the observation, even if informed consent hasn’t been obtained” (Dyer, 1995). However, if the observation is planned within a more private environment, consent must be gained before it is possible to start the experiment.

Another problem arises in regard to volunteering to participate: offering any sort of reward could be seen as an attempt by the researcher at coercion. Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (1998) concede that while a contribution towards expenses is unlikely to be a deciding factor, it is “when the reimbursements or

rewards for participating are great enough to sway consent decisions” that the researcher’s motives have to be examined.

The second major guideline is concerned with the right of the participant to withdraw both themselves and any data they have generated from the experiment at any time without penalty. Participants should be reminded wherever possible (although it may not be possible during observational research) that they are able to withdraw, especially if they are experiencing any form of distress. Eysenck (1998) uses Milgram’s research on obedience (1974) as an example of a breach of this principle, as participants were told “that they had to proceed with the experiment, even if they were very reluctant to do so”. Reminding subjects of their right to withdraw is also an illustration of the need of the researcher to be aware of changes in the participant’s demeanour. For example, in an experiment involving an interview, if a question causes a change in the interviewee’s tone of voice, or they shift position restlessly, the interviewer should reaffirm their ability to leave when they want.

The need for the researcher to be aware of the situation can also be seen in experiments where the participants feel under pressure to continue. Once involved in an experiment, it may be “difficult for the participant to disengage from the experimental situation if she (sic) wishes to do so. In effect, is it possible for someone to become ‘locked in’ to the situation” (Dyer, 1995). The reasons for this are varied, and include the fact that the subject may feel they are in some way obliged to help the researcher, or that the participant’s role is one of a passive nature as in the majority of cases everything is being controlled by the researcher.

Deception and debriefing are two guidelines that are in many instances linked by the experimental design. To gain a meaningful result it is often necessary for the researcher to deceive the participants: in Milgram’s experiment on obedience, the subjects were told that they were involved in an experiment concerned with “the effects of punishment on learning”. If a question was answered incorrectly, they were to administer an electrical shock of increasing intensity as a punishment to the person who answered the

question incorrectly. However, this was a classic deception as the subjects of the experiment were in fact the people issuing the electrical shocks. Milgram was trying to see the extent to which a person would comply with instructions that were obviously resulting in a great deal of cruelty. Had the 'real' subjects been told before the experiment that they were not giving electrical shocks, and the screams were from an actor, the entire experiment would have been a nonsense. By not making them aware of these facts, Milgram was able to discover the remarkable degree of obedience demonstrated by the subjects.

It is after an experiment involving any sort of deception, however trivial, that debriefing is critical. Had Milgram's subjects left the laboratory in the belief that they had killed someone, there is no knowing what psychological damage would have been inflicted on them. Through the process of debriefing, where they got to meet the actor, and have the real purpose of the experiment was explained, they were able to leave, ideally, in the same state in which they had arrived. If the researcher feels that the participants are not able to leave in such a state, it may be necessary to make arrangements for them to "discuss their feelings with someone who possesses the appropriate skills, such as a trained counsellor" (Dyer, 1995). Debriefing should also involve the researcher making the participants aware of their findings, and discussing the experimental procedures.

The participant's right to confidentiality is a further important aspect of ethical psychology. By the very nature of the research, participants are often asked to disclose "their thoughts, attitudes, and experiences" (Nunn, 1998). While the participant should be able to make an informed decision about sharing the information, there is also an obligation on the researcher, or therapist, not to disclose this information to third parties. This can, of course, lead to moral dilemmas for the researcher; but failing to observe this guideline could easily ruin the researcher's reputation, unless "they discover a situation where human life is in danger" (BPS, 1990).

As can be seen, the guidelines are in place primarily for the protection of the participant, but they also act to protect the researchers and psychology in general. If the guidelines are breached, both the researcher

and the validity of psychology research would be questioned. It is for this reason that one of the final guidelines places a moral responsibility on psychologists to monitor the work of their colleagues to maintain high ethical standards.

(1550 words)

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