

# Psychology Research Ethics

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Saul McLeod, published 2007, updated 2015

Ethics refers to the correct rules of conduct necessary when carrying out research. We have a moral responsibility to protect research participants from harm.

However important the issue under investigation psychologists need to remember that they have a duty to respect the rights and dignity of research participants. This means that they must abide by certain moral principles and rules of conduct.

In Britain ethical guidelines for research are published by the British Psychological Society and in America by the American Psychological Association. The purpose of these codes of conduct is to protect research participants, the reputation of psychology and psychologists themselves.

Moral issues rarely yield a simple, unambiguous, right or wrong answer. It is therefore often a matter of judgement whether the research is justified or not. For example, it might be that a study causes psychological or physical discomfort to participants, maybe they suffer pain or perhaps even come to serious harm.

On the other hand the investigation could lead to discoveries that benefit the participants themselves or even have the potential to increase the sum of human happiness. Rosenthal and Rosnow (1984) also talk about the potential costs of failing to carry out certain research. Who is to weigh up these costs and benefits? Who is to judge whether the ends justify the means?

Finally, if you are ever in doubt as to whether research is ethical or not it is worthwhile remembering that if there is a conflict of interest between the participants and the researcher it is the interests of the subjects that should take priority.

Studies must now undergo an extensive review by an institutional review board (US) or ethics committee (UK) before they are implemented. All UK research requires ethical approval by one or more of the following:

- (a) Department Ethics Committee (DEC): for most routine research.
- (b) Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC): for non routine research.
- (c) External Ethics Committee (EEC): for research that is externally regulated (e.g. NHS research).

Committees review proposals to assess if the potential benefits of the research are justifiable in the light of possible risk of physical or psychological harm. These committees may request researchers make changes to the study's design or procedure, or in extreme cases deny approval of the study altogether.

The British Psychological Society (BPS) and American Psychological Association (APA) have both issued a code of ethics in psychology that provides guidelines for the conduct of research. Some of the more important ethical issues are as follows:

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## **Informed Consent**

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Whenever possible investigators should obtain the consent of participants. In practice this means it is not sufficient to simply get potential participants to say "Yes". They also need to know what it is that they are agreeing to. In other words the psychologist should, so far as is practicable explain what is involved in advance and obtain the informed consent of participants.

Before the study begins the researcher must outline to the participants what the research is about, and then ask their consent (i.e. permission) to take part. An adult (18ys +) capable of giving permission to participate in a study can provide consent. Parents/legal guardians of minors can also provide consent to allow their children to participate in a study.

However, it is not always possible to gain informed consent. Where it is impossible for the researcher to ask the actual participants, a similar group of people can be asked how they would feel about taking part. If they think it would be OK then it can be assumed that the real participants will also find it acceptable. This is known as presumptive consent. However, a problem with this method is that there might there be a mismatch between how people think they would feel/behave and how they actually feel and behave during a study?

In order that consent be 'informed', consent forms may need to be accompanied by an information sheet for participants setting out information about the proposed study (in lay terms) along with details about the investigators and how they can be contacted.

## **Participants must be given information relating to**

Statement that participation is voluntary and that refusal to participate will not result in any consequences or any loss of benefits that the person is otherwise entitled to receive.
Purpose of the research.
All foreseeable risks and discomforts to the participant (if there are any). These include not only physical injury but also possible psychological.
Procedures involved in the research.
Benefits of the research to society and possibly to the individual human subject.
Length of time the subject is expected to participate.
Person to contact for answers to questions or in the event of injury or emergency.

Subjects' right to confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

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## Debrief

After the research is over the participant should be able to discuss the procedure and the findings with the psychologist. They must be given a general idea of what the researcher was investigating and why, and their part in the research should be explained.

Participants must be told if they have been deceived and given reasons why. They must be asked if they have any questions and those questions should be answered honestly and as fully as possible.

Debriefing should take place as soon as possible and be as full as possible; experimenters should take reasonable steps to ensure that participants understand debriefing.

“The purpose of debriefing is to remove any misconceptions and anxieties that the participants have about the research and to leave them with a sense of dignity, knowledge, and a perception of time not wasted” (Harris, 1998).

The aim of the debriefing is not just to provide information, but to help the participant leave the experimental situation in a similar frame of mind as when he/she entered it (Aronson, 1988).

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## Protection of Participants

Researchers must ensure that those taking part in research will not be caused distress. They must be protected from physical and mental harm. This means you must not embarrass, frighten, offend or harm participants.

Normally, the risk of harm must be no greater than in ordinary life, i.e. participants should not be exposed to risks greater than or additional to those encountered in their normal lifestyles.

The researcher must also ensure that if vulnerable groups are to be used (elderly, disabled, children, etc.), they must receive special care. For example, if studying children, make sure their participation is brief as they get tired easily and have a limited attention span.

Researchers are not always accurately able to predict the risks of taking part in a study and in some cases a therapeutic debriefing may be necessary if participants have become disturbed during the research (as happened to some participants in Zimbardo's prisoners/guards study).

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## Deception

This is where participants are misled or wrongly informed about the aims of the research. Types of deception include (i) deliberate misleading, e.g. using confederates, staged manipulations in field settings, deceptive instructions; (ii) deception by omission, e.g.,

failure to disclose full information about the study, or creating ambiguity.

The researcher should avoid deceiving participants about the nature of the research unless there is no alternative – and even then this would need to be judged acceptable by an independent expert. However, there are some types of research that cannot be carried out without at least some element of deception.

For example, in Milgram's study of obedience the participants thought they were giving electric shocks to a learner when they answered a question wrong. In reality, no shocks were given and the learners were confederates of Milgram.

This is sometimes necessary in order to avoid demand characteristics (i.e. the clues in an experiment which lead participants to think they know what the researcher is looking for). Another common example is when a stooge or confederate of the experimenter is used (this was the case in both the experiments carried out by Asch).

However, participants must be deceived as little as possible, and any deception must not cause distress. Researchers can determine whether participants are likely to be distressed when deception is disclosed, by consulting culturally relevant groups. If the participant is likely to object or be distressed once they discover the true nature of the research at debriefing, then the study is unacceptable.

If you have gained participants' informed consent by deception, then they will have agreed to take part without actually knowing what they were consenting to. The true nature of the research should be revealed at the earliest possible opportunity, or at least during debriefing.

Some researchers argue that deception can never be justified and object to this practice as it (i) violates an individual's right to choose to participate; (ii) is a questionable basis on which to build a discipline; and (iii) leads to distrust of psychology in the community.

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## **Confidentiality**

Participants, and the data gained from them must be kept anonymous unless they give their full consent. No names must be used in a research report.

What do we do if we find out something which should be disclosed (e.g. criminal act)? Researchers have no legal obligation to disclose criminal acts and have to determine which is the most important consideration: their duty to the participant vs. duty to the wider community.

Ultimately, decisions to disclose information will have to be set in the context of the aims of the research.

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## **Withdrawal from an Investigation**

Participants should be able to leave a study at any time if they feel uncomfortable. They should also be allowed to withdraw their data. They should be told at the start of the study

that they have the right to withdraw. They should not have pressure placed upon them to continue if they do not want to (a guideline flouted in Milgram's research).

Participants may feel they shouldn't withdraw as this may 'spoil' the study. Many participants are paid or receive course credits, they may worry they won't get this if they withdraw. Even at the end of the study the participant has a final opportunity to withdraw the data they have provided for the research.

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