

Psychology Human Research Ethics

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

The purpose of these codes of conduct is to protect research participants, the reputation of psychology and psychologists themselves. The American Psychological Association (APA) has 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:

Informed Consent

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. This is acceptable as long as what happens to the participants is something that could easily happen to them in everyday life. For example, if the research involves observing people in a bus queue, those people may be observed by anyone when they are in the queue.

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.
- Procedures involved in the research.
- All foreseeable risks and discomforts to the participant (if there are any). These include not only physical injury but also possible psychological.
- 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.

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. They 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).

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).

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.

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 the most important consideration is: 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.

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.