

ETHICAL GUIDELINES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH



There are probably more major ethical issues in Psychology than in any other subject. There are a number of reasons for this:

- psychology involves the study of living creatures (human and animal)
- results of psychological research may reveal unpleasant facts about human behaviour.

The key ethical guidelines

Informed consent

Means researchers should tell potential participants exactly what is going to happen to them in the experiment, and ask them, without pressure of any kind, whether they are willing to take part.

Sometimes, researchers feel that they cannot tell participants what the experiment is about because they may show demand characteristics. Children are often considered to be too young to give their own consent, and the consent of their parents or teachers is enough and should be gained.

Deception

Means lying to people and deceiving them about something to do with the study.

The APA guidelines say that you should try to avoid intentionally deceiving participants about the purpose and nature of the investigation. However, in certain circumstances, deceiving your participants is acceptable and can be justified when:

- it does not lead to harmful consequences for participants;
- the study is potentially very useful to society or our understanding
- not deceiving participants may make the research invalid - in some studies, if participants are told exactly what the study is about, then they may behave differently (this is called **demand characteristics**).

Right of withdrawal

This means giving people the opportunity to leave the study at any time if they no longer want to take part.

This means that they can withdraw from the study and that the researcher will not use any of their data. Participants should be told about their right to withdraw and if they are being paid for participating they should be informed that they will still be paid if they drop out.

Harm to participants

Participants should not be harmed, either physically or psychologically when participating in research.

In practice, however, participants often suffer distress or pain during the course of an experiment and this is considered acceptable as long as:

- the harm is unavoidable, and the study could not be carried out in any other way;
- the harm is short-term and relatively minor;
- the participants are not allowed to leave the study with any residual harm or distress.



Debriefing

Debriefing means telling the participants what the study was about before they leave .

One way to make sure that participants leave the experiment without suffering on-going distress or harm is to debrief, i.e. tell them exactly what the experiment was all about and reassure them that their behaviour in the experiment was 'normal'.

Confidentiality

Means keeping personal information confidential.

It is clearly important that personal information given by participants during the course of a study, or the results of tests taken by participants, are kept confidential. Results can be published, but they must not identify the individual, either by name, or by any other way. Participants should always be told that personal data will be kept confidential.



Observational Research

Studies that observe people in their natural environment must respect the privacy and psychological well-being of the individuals studied. Participants should either: (i) give their consent to being observed or (ii) be observed in a situation where they would normally expect to be observed by strangers. E.g. in a public park or on a bus.

