

Ethical Issues in Psychology

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Whether you are involved in teaching, practice or research, ethical issues in psychology should be at the forefront of everything that you do. Knowing the obvious and not so obvious ethical pitfalls is essential, this article will help remind you of some of the issues you may come up against.

As with any science, psychology relies on the collection of research to support theories. As the study of the mind and behaviour, psychology requires certain ethical guidelines when dealing with people as subjects.

When we talk about 'ethical issues' in psychology, we are referring to ideas and topics that invoke our moral responsibility. Ethical practices in psychology have changed over time. In 1947, at the end of the Second World War, research ethics principles for human experimentation known as the Nuremberg Code were set as a result of human experiments in concentration camps. Combined with the Declaration of Geneva (1948), these principles became the Declaration of Helsinki, the current cornerstone document on human research ethics.

Today, ethical guidelines are published by the British Psychological Society in the United Kingdom and the American Psychological Association in the United States. The purpose of these representative bodies is to protect research subjects and researchers alike. Whilst there are differences in the details between the two sets of guidelines, they share many important features. Here are some examples of ethical issues in psychology.

Informed Consent

This is one of the most important issues in psychological research. It is important to remember that it breaks down not only to 'consent' (permission) but, more importantly, 'informed' (having/showing knowledge).

Whenever it is possible, researchers must explain as far as possible the nature of their research and obtain the unpressured consent of participants who understand it. Reasonable explanations could include the purpose of the research, the type of information to be collected, methods of collection, confidentiality conditions, time commitments, risks and so on.

Normally, this is possible. An adult (i.e. someone aged 18 or older) eligible for a certain project can give their consent to take part, whereas this must be done by parents or guardians of children (i.e. someone under the age of 18).

However, when this isn't possible, a researcher can obtain 'presumptive consent'. In this case, people with similar properties to the potential participant are asked for their feelings about taking part and consent can be assumed based on a consensus.

One criticism of presumptive consent is that there can be a disparity between how people think they would feel during a project and how they actually feel during that project.

Deception

A discussion of ethical issues in psychology wouldn't be complete without mentioning Milgram. A famous study of obedience was conducted in 1963 by Stanley Milgram, in which he evaluated whether or not acts of genocide could be justified by the common defence of 'following orders'.

In this study, participants thought they were giving electric shocks to people who provided incorrect answers to certain questions. However, this wasn't actually the case; the people providing answers were actors in collaboration with Milgram.

Milgram deliberately misled participants about the aims and methods of the research he was conducting (although deception also covers failure to disclose full information about a project). Because deception is now an issue under the spotlight, this would lead many to argue that his experiment was not ethical.

Some researchers argue that it is never justifiable to use deception in psychological research as it can cause distress and make people distrustful about the profession and its methods.

There are, however, some types of research that require deception in order to make that research valid. It is possible for participants of a project to form interpretations of that project's purpose and subconsciously change their behaviour to fit that interpretation.

This phenomenon is known as 'demand characteristics' and although it cannot be eliminated, it can be minimised. If, as Milgram argued, deception can be used, there are conditions; the deception must be as minor as possible, it must not cause distress and the true nature of the project must be revealed as early as possible.

Confidentiality

In modern research, social injury (i.e. personal information becoming public) is carefully considered. The risk of psychological harm is real; a participant could be embarrassed or face consequences upon the revelation of information about their intelligence or political affiliation to an employer, for example.

In most circumstances, information obtained from participants must be kept anonymous and names must not be used in stored information. No one should be able to identify participants from results.

However, there can be exceptions to this rule. For example, what should a psychologist do if a client describes abusive behaviour towards their children? In this case, the psychologist has legal authority to inform social services. But while there is legal authority, there is not a legal obligation – it must be determined which takes precedence, the psychologist's duty to their client or to people around them.

This creates a grey area in which a psychologist must decide whether or not to disclose information and therefore breach confidentiality guidelines.

Right to Withdraw

Just as participants have a right to confidentiality, they also have the right to withdraw from a project at any time, for any reason. There should be no pressurisation on participants to continue. Similarly, participants also reserve the right to have their personal data destroyed.

This is another principle from which Milgram diverged in his obedience experiment. As stated in Milgram's *Behavioral Study of Obedience* (1963) itself, if at any time the subject indicated his desire to halt the experiment, he was given a succession of verbal prods by the experimenter, in this order:

1. Please continue
2. The experiment requires that you continue
3. It is absolutely essential that you continue
4. You have no other choice, you must go on

If the participant still wished to stop after all four successive verbal prods, the experiment was stopped. Otherwise, it was stopped after the subject had given the maximum 450-volt shock three times in

succession. In this case, there was very clear pressure placed on participants to continue the study. Today, this would be deemed unethical.

Debriefing

When participants of a project are aware that they have taken part in an investigation, researchers should provide them with any and all information that will complete their knowledge and understanding of the project, or 'debrief' them.

A debriefing should include an opportunity for the participant to ask questions or to voice opinions, either positive or negative, about the project. In the code of ethics and conduct, an example is given: in the case a negative mood is induced due to a certain project, it would be considered ethical to counter this by inducing a positive mood in the participant before they leave the setting.

The debriefing is also an opportunity for the researcher to inform participants of any deception and to give reasons for that deception (see above). According to Ben Harris in *Key Words: A History of Debriefing In Social Psychology* (1988), "the purpose of debriefing is to remove any misconception 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."

For the sake of your personal practice and psychology as a whole its important to consider these and other ethical issues in psychology whenever working with people.