ETHICS

**ETHICS are standards of conduct** that distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, justices and injustice.

The primary aim of psychology must be to improve the quality of human life and to do this it is necessary to carry out research with human participants. Research psychologists have a duty to respect the rights and dignity of all participants.

This means that they must follow certain **moral principles and rules of conduct**, which are designed to protect both participants and the reputation of psychology. The professional organisation that governs psychology in Britain is the **British Psychological Society (BPS).** They have produced a list of **ethical guidelines** that all practising psychologists must follow.

**An ethical issue** **is any situation that repeatedly gives rise to an ethical dilemma.** For example, whether or not to deceive a research participant in a psychological study in order to gain more worthwhile findings is an ethical issue because it creates an ethical dilemma for the researcher .i.e. What should they do? One of the main reasons organisations like the BPS have developed ethical guidelines is that it removes the need for researchers to resolve these dilemmas on their own.

**The BPS ethical guidelines**

Informed consent

Participants must give their consent to take part in research and this consent must be ‘informed’. **This means that information must be made available on which to base a decision to participate or not.** Participants should be told what they are letting themselves in for. Only then are they in a position to give informed consent.

**To study participants without consent would be ethically acceptable so long as what happens to the participants could just as likely happen to them in everyday life.** E.g. observation in naturalistic setting such as bus queues. People in bus queues may be observed by anyone. In the case of young people under 16, consent should also be obtained from their parents.

A major problem with informed consent is the possibility that the researcher will ‘give the game away’ and thus influence participants’ behaviour. As a result, a case can be made for withholding information.

Deception

Deception means that information is withheld from participants; they are misled about the purpose of the study and what will happen during it. According to the BPS guideline ***‘Intentional deception of the participants should be avoided whenever possible’.*** In particular deception is unacceptable if it leads to ‘***discomfort anger or objections from the participants’ when the deception is revealed after the research has been complete’.***

But, the BPS accepts that **sometimes deception is unavoidable**. In such cases the researcher must:

* 1. Make sure that alternative procedures which avoid deception are not available
  2. Consult with colleagues about how participants might be affected by the deception
  3. Reveal the deception to the participants immediately after the research has been completed.

Protection from harm

The BPS ethical guideline states that ‘***Investigators have a primary responsibility to protect participants from physical and mental harm during the investigation’.***

But, no investigation is risk free; the guiding principle is that **risks should be no greater than the risks participants are exposed to in their normal lifestyles.** Participants should be encouraged to contact the investigator after the research if they have any worries or concerns. The investigator has a responsibility to detect and remove any consequences of the research.

Confidentiality: protection from harm involves confidentiality. Participants may be asked personal questions. **They must be told that there is no need to answer these questions and, if they do that their answers will be treated in confidence.** That is, they should remain anonymous. Invasion of privacy can result in unease or distress. The **BPS states that unless people have given their consent, they should only be observed in situations where they would expect to be observed by strangers.** This limits observational research to public places.

Withdrawal:Participants should have the right to withdraw from an investigation at any time. This is true even if they are being paid to take part. They should be told this at the start of the research. No attempt should be made to encourage or persuade them to remain.

Debriefing

Debriefing involves **telling it all after the investigation is complete**. Researchers should discuss the aims of the research with the participants, making sure they understand how they have contributed to meeting those aims. **Any deception is disclosed, explained and justified**. Attempts are made to undo any negative effects of the research. Codes of conduct for research state that all participants have a right to a debriefing session after the investigation has been completed. But, participants may be reluctant to express negative feelings during debriefing due to embarrassment or not wanting to upset the researcher.

Ethics Task

Look at the following brief descriptions of studies. Decide which you think are real and which are fake. What are the ethical principles that these studies violate?

1. In a busy subway, a person collapses bleeding from the mouth. The person is a confederate of the experimenter and the event is staged. Bystanders are covertly observed to see if they help and how long they take to help. An investigation into bystander responses to emergency situations.
2. An experimenter in a pick-up truck, with a rifle visible in the back and a sticker on the bumper saying ‘Vengeance’ stops at red lights. The experimenter does not move when the lights turn green thus blocking traffic. This experiment is testing the impact of aggressive stimuli on ‘horn-honking’ behaviour.
3. Baby rhesus monkeys reared in complete isolation except for two surrogate ‘mothers’; one a wire structure with a plastic face, and the other a wire structure but covered with terry towelling. This study is investigating the nature of mother-child relationships.
4. Rats are given an electric shock to the feet, and soon afterwards a toy rubber hedgehog flies (on wires) across the top edge of their cage. An investigation into the effects of aversive conditioning.
5. Participants are presented with 2,000 sheets of random numbers, asked to add up 224 pairs of numbers on each sheet, and then tear the sheet into 32 pieces before going onto the next. After five hours of this clearly useless task, some of the subjects are still going and have to be stopped by the experimenter. An investigation into the power of the psychology experiment.
6. Rats are given electric shocks to the brain after they have learnt a maze to see how this affects their memory of the maze.
7. Ammonia is used to punish a deaf-blind five year old boy engaging in serious self-injurious behaviour (self mutilation). An investigation based on real life interventions into the relative effects of various types of punishment on self-injurious behaviour.
8. Head banging behaviour is taught to rhesus monkeys, extinguished (got rid of) and then re-established in order to investigate the hypothesis that some forms of self-injurious behaviour are linked to reinforcing features in the environment.
9. Electric shock administered to homosexuals as they view photographs of clothed and naked males. An investigation into the treatment of ‘sexual deviations’.
10. A hidden observer in a men’s toilet records the time taken before participants begin to urinate and the time they take urinating. A confederate of the experimenter either stands in the next stall to the subject or one stall away. An investigation into the effects of invasion of privacy on arousal.