

## Lesson 4

# Experimental Research and Ethics



### Learning Objectives

- All students **will** review their knowledge of experimental research by designing an experimental study in response to a given brief.
- All students **will** name the major principles of the BPS code of ethics and describe ethical issues in psychological research.
- All students **should** use their knowledge to analyse ethical issues in specific examples of research.
- All students **could** explain how to deal with ethical issues raised by a given research scenario.

### Key Terms

- BPS code of ethics
- Ethical issues

**Extension activity:** Discover more about unethical research in psychology:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7brxo3QfKg>



### Questions to guide your thinking ...

- What is the role of the BPS code of ethics?
- What ethical issues do researchers in psychology face?
- How do researchers deal with ethical issues in research?

## Plan an experimental study

- You will be given a piece of experimental research to plan. You should include the following details in your plan:

<b>Aim:</b> A general statement about the purpose of the study.
<b>Independent variable*:</b> The variable to be manipulated.
<b>Dependent variable*:</b> The variable to be measured.
<b>Hypothesis*:</b> A clear, precise testable statement about the relationship between the variables to be investigated. (Directional or non-directional.)
<b>The type of experiment:</b> Laboratory, field, natural, quasi.
<b>The experimental design to be used and reason(s) for this choice:</b> Independent groups, repeated measures or matched pairs.
<b>What controls are necessary and why?</b> (E.g. counterbalancing, random allocation, randomisation and standardisation)

**Note\*:** variables should be operationalised – clearly defined in terms of how they can be measured.

## Ethics and Research in Psychology

**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 dignity and wellbeing of all participants in their studies.

This means that psychologists 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. This is known as the **BPS Code of Ethics**.

**The BPS code is built around four major principles:**

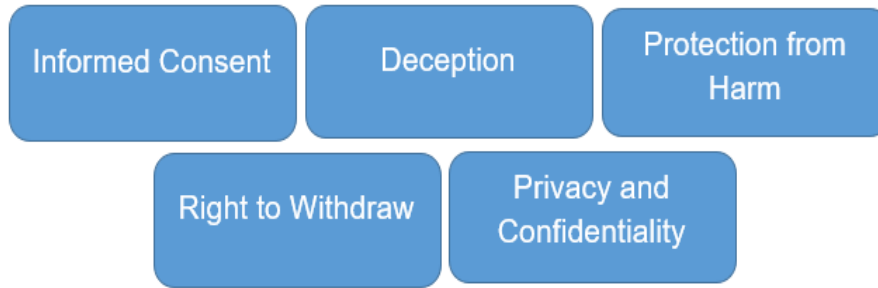


## Ethical Issues in Psychological Research

- What is meant by an 'ethical issue' in psychological research?



# Ethical Guidelines in Psychological Research



## INFORMED CONSENT

Giving consent means agreeing to something – a participant should always agree to take part in a study without feeling coerced. **Informed consent** involves making a participant aware of the aims of research, as well as the nature of the procedure, the purpose of their role and what their data will be used for. Participants should then be able to make an informed judgement about whether they wish to take part in the research.



## RIGHT TO WITHDRAW



Participants should be allowed to leave **at any point** during the study if they decide they no longer want to take part, including retrospectively after the study has finished (their data would be removed from the research and destroyed).

## DECEPTION

Researchers should **not withhold any information** from participants or actively mislead them about the true nature of the study they are to be involved in. Participants who have not received adequate information (or who have been deliberately lied to) are unable to give **informed consent**.



## PROTECTION FROM HARM



Psychologists have a responsibility to protect their participants from **physical and psychological harm** (e.g. embarrassment or humiliation, stress or loss of self-esteem/dignity). Participants should not be exposed to more risk than they would expect to experience in everyday life.

## PRIVACY and CONFIDENTIALITY

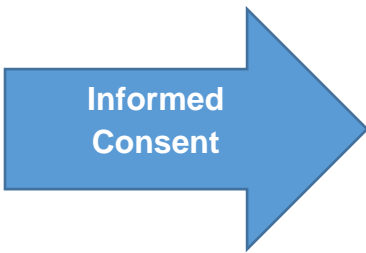


Privacy refers to the right to **control information** about oneself. If this is invaded, then confidentiality should be protected.

Confidentiality refers to the right to have any **personal information protected**. This is a legal right under the Data Protection Act. Participants in a study should **not be identifiable** and nor should their geographical location.



Ethical issue	How psychologists deal with this issue
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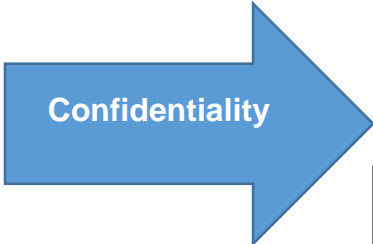


- a) Participants should be issued **consent letter** detailing all the information that may affect their decision to participate in the study.
- b) For **children under 16**, consent should be sought from a parent/guardian. Where an individual's capacity is affected by **learning or communication difficulties**, consent should be sought from a person who is legally authorised to give consent on their behalf. Participants from such **vulnerable populations** should be given every opportunity to understand the nature, purpose and outcomes of any research participation.
- c) In order to preserve the objective of a study, the researcher may obtain **PRESUMPTIVE CONSENT**: Rather than getting the consent from actual participants, the consent is obtained from a **similar** group. If they agree, then the consent of the original sample is **PRESUMED**.
- d) **PRIOR GENERAL CONSENT** of the participants is taken when they agree to take part in a number of studies - including the one that involves deception. By consenting, participants are consenting to be deceived.
- e) **RETROSPECTIVE CONSENT** is given after the participants have already done the study. Participants should be given the right to withdraw their data from the study.



After the study, the participants should be given a full **DEBRIEF** about the true aims of the study and any other details that were not provided before or during the study. Participants should also be clear about what their data will be used for and must be given the **right to withhold** the data (as they might not be comfortable with information about them being shared). This is particularly important where **retrospective consent** has been used.

Participants should be reassured about any concerns related to their performance in the study (e.g. they might be concerned that their behaviour was not normal). **Counselling** should be provided to participants should they feel anxious/embarrassed after the study.



If personal details are held, these must be protected. However, it is more usual for the **anonymity** of the participants to be maintained in order to protect their personal details. To achieve this, researchers usually use numbers or initials when writing up the research

In research institutions, such as universities, the BPS Code of Ethics and the society's guidelines for research are implemented by an **ETHICS COMMITTEE**. Such committees are made up of psychologists and other experts who decide whether or not the research is ethical enough to be carried out.

**An ethics committee may use a COST-BENEFIT analysis** to assess the viability of a research proposal. Benefits may include the value or ground breaking nature of research. Possible costs may be in terms of effect on individual participants or to the reputation of psychology as a whole.

➤ **You are a member of an ethics committee. Read the following research proposals and identify the ethical issues that they raise. Where appropriate, suggest ways to deal with these ethical issues or redesign the study.**

1. The 'Sunshine Wellness Baby Centre' would like to investigate whether women have a greater resistance to pain during labour than at the beginning of their pregnancy. They will approach women during their first midwife appointment and offer them £1000 to take part in the study. Women will need to attend a monthly appointment at the Baby Centre where they will receive an electric shock (beginning with 60v) and rate their pain level on a chart. The voltage will increase until the participant feels it would be too painful to continue.



2. Manchester Armed Response Unit would like to investigate the emerging culture of 'have a go heroes' during violent crimes. They would like to have undercover police officers pretend to be criminals and 'rob' an off-license using a fake gun. The members of the public will not be aware of the experiment (including the shop keeper) in order to ensure realism.

3. Leeds University would like to investigate why men visit prostitutes. They intend to observe men who collect a prostitute in their car and record their license plate number. In conjunction with the police and DVLA they will find the address of these men and visit them to conduct a semi-structured interview about their use of prostitutes.



4. Guilford Hospital would like to investigate the effects of peer pressure on needle-sharing. They propose to approach 5 known drug users during their HIV checkups and ask them to wear hidden cameras as they visit their friends who take drugs. These drug users will then pressure one friend to use a dirty needle and the camera will record the amount of time taken to convince the friend to do it.



- **Read the following research scenario. What information would need to be given to participants for them to make an informed decision about taking part?**

A psychologist was interested in looking at the effects of a restricted diet on psychological functioning. A group of 20 healthy, young adult volunteers agreed to spend four weeks in a research unit. They were kept warm and comfortable but given only water and small amounts of plain food. They were able to socialise with one another and watch television, but they had to keep to strict, set mealtimes and were not allowed to eat anything between meals. The psychologist carried out various tests of emotional and cognitive functioning during the four-week period. One area of interest for the psychologist was the effect of dietary restriction on the perception of food. He tested this by asking the volunteers to draw pictures of food at the end of each week. When all the drawings had been completed, the psychologist used content analysis to analyse them.

- **Exam practice:**

**Question 1:**

A case study was carried out on Peter whose brain was damaged in a motorcycle accident. Psychologists tested how many numbers he could hold in his short-term memory. They did this by reading him lists of numbers and asking him to recall the numbers immediately in the right order. He could recall a maximum of two items. The psychologists found that his long-term memory was normal.

Identify **one** ethical issue associated with this case study of Peter. Suggest how psychologists could deal with this ethical issue. **[4 marks]**

**Ethical issue** .....

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**How psychologists could deal with this ethical issue** .....

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**Question 2:**

Two researchers obtained a sample of ten people whose ages ranged from 20-years-old to 60-years-old.

Each participant was asked to take part in a discussion of social care issues. This included discussion about who should pay for social care for elderly people and how to deal with people struggling with mental health problems. A confederate of the researchers was given a script to follow in which a series of discussion points was written for the confederate to introduce.

Each participant then came into a room individually and the discussion with the confederate took place. The maximum time allowed for a discussion was 30 minutes.

The researchers observed the discussions between the confederate and participants and rated the active engagement of the participants in the discussion. The ratings were between 1, (not at all interested) and 20, (extremely interested.) The researchers believed that the rating provided a measurement of the participants' attitudes towards social care issues.

The following data were obtained in the study:

Age of participant	Attitude to social care issues rating
21	5
23	3
34	8
36	12
40	10
47	13
52	17
53	15
58	18
60	20

Explain how the researchers should have addressed **two** ethical issues in the investigation.

**[4 marks]**

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