



ETHICAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY

handout number

6.12

Activity type Consolidation

This gapped handout covers the basic principles of the guidelines with a couple of examples of studies used to

emphasise the points made and put them in context.

Practical use

Individual: class exercise or homework

Additional notes

This provide a starting point for learning the guidelines before going on to the more complex issues covered in the other two worksheets on ethics.

Answers

Ethical issues arise in Psychology when there is a conflict between the rights of **participants** and the needs of **researchers** to conduct research that makes a meaningful contribution to **society**.

One major issue is that of informed consent. This involves making participants aware of the **aims** and the **procedures** of the research and informing them of their **right** to withdraw. However, from the viewpoint of the researcher, telling the participant the purpose of the research may render it **meaningless** as participants will no longer act as they would in the usual course of their lives. This was a particular issue in the study by **Milgram** as no participants would have potentially harmed 'Mr Wallace' if they knew the purpose of the study. Informed consent can be a particular problem in **covert** observation studies since participants may have no opportunity to consent.

Deception is another major issue. This may involve simply withholding information from participants or

may involve being deliberately **dishonest**. Deception can be justified if it does not cause undue **distress**. It is important to do a full **debrief** at the end of the study so that participants are aware of the aims and can **withhold** their data if they so wish.

A third issue is that of the safety of participants who have the right to be protected from **physical** and psychological harm. The latter includes not causing them to feel **embarrassed** or feel inadequate as they may have done in the research on conformity by **Asch**.

Privacy and **confidentiality** are two other linked issues. If **personal** details are held they must be protected. If possible it is better to have no such details, that is to maintain **anonymity**.

Under all circumstances it is important that participants are treated with **respect** and their **dignity** maintained.

DEALING WITH ETHICAL ISSUES

handout number

6.13

Activity type Application

This exercise starts with a general ethical point (what are ethical issues trying to balance?) and provides a useful mnemonic, inviting students to make up their own. It then requires students to suggest ways of dealing with ethical issues, such as what to do if it is impractical to

gain informed consent. The handout requires only a brief summary of dealing with all the important issues (so that students have a summary from which to revise) and the extension activity requires students to expand on these issues.

Practical use

Individual: homework (see additional notes)

Additional notes

The basic exercise followed by the extension activity provide two separate pieces of work. We would suggest that a way of organising this is to get students to do the basic exercise in class, go over it to check that it is

correct (rather than taking in for marking), then give the extension activity as a homework.



Answers

The balance is between the rights of the participants (in research studies) and the goals of research to produce authentic, valid and worthwhile data.

The BPS (British Psychological Society) is the body responsible for ethical guidelines.

1. How do you gain consent? Participants should be issued with a consent letter or form detailing all relevant information that might affect their decision to participate. Assuming the participant agrees, this is then signed. For investigations involving children under 16, a signature of parental consent is required.

2. Three alternative ways of getting consent are:

- Presumptive consent
- Prior general consent
- Retrospective consent

3. Dealing with deception and protection from harm:

- Full debrief
- Right to withdraw
- Reassurance/counselling

4. Dealing with confidentiality:

- Maintain anonymity
- Protection of data (reassurance of this).

Extension activity

CONSENT: With respect to presumptive consent, rather than getting consent from the participants themselves, a similar group of people are asked if the study is acceptable. If this group agree, then consent of the original participants is 'presumed'. Prior general consent involves asking participants to give their permission to take part in a number of different studies, including one that will involve deception. By consenting, participants are effectively consenting to be deceived. Retrospective consent requires that participants are asked for their consent during debriefing, having already taken part in the study. They may not have been aware of their participation or they may have been subject to deception.

DEALING WITH DECEPTION and PROTECTION FROM HARM

At the end of a study, participants should be given a full debrief. If deception was involved, participants should be made aware of the true aims of the investigation. Participants should also be made aware of any details they were not supplied with during the study, such as the existence of other groups or experimental conditions. Participants should also be told what their data will be used for and must be given the right to withhold data if they wish. This is particularly important if retrospective consent is a feature of the study. Participants may

have natural concerns related to their performance within the investigation, and so should be reassured that their behaviour was typical or normal. In extreme cases, if participants have been subject to stress or embarrassment, they may require counselling which the researcher should provide.

DEALING WITH CONFIDENTIALITY

If personal details are held these must be protected. However, it is more usual to simply record no personal details, i.e. maintain anonymity. Instead, researchers usually refer to participants using numbers when writing up the investigation. It is standard practice that during briefing and debriefing, participants are reminded that their data will be protected throughout the process.



ETHICS IN CONTEXT

Activity type Consolidation

This is a ready to go homework sheet where students are required to state a relevant issue, explain why it is an

issue in the context of the given study and suggest a way of dealing with it.

Practical use

Individual homework task

Additional notes

When students see an exam question that asks for a relevant ethical issue to be named they will often take the first one they think of – this may not necessarily be

the best one, particularly if they then have to say how it should be dealt with. Encourage them to select wisely by going through all the possibilities before deciding.

Answers

Suggested answers – there are a number of possibilities in each case. One example for each is worked through here.

1. An experiment to investigate whether the memories of 3 to 4-year-olds are more susceptible to influence than adults' memories.
 - a. Protection from harm.
 - b. Children are vulnerable and need to be protected from distressing memories.
 - c. Ensure that the memory that is planted is one that they could have been expected to have had anyway and one that is not distressing.
2. A field experiment to investigate how people react to orders from someone dressed in a uniform or not.
 - a. No informed consent, no right to withdraw.
 - b. The participants have been unwittingly deceived and it may be difficult to debrief them.
 - c. The experiment should be assessed by an ethical committee to decide whether the intervention causes no risk or potential harm to participants.
3. A study to see whether parenting style affects later school attainment.
 - a. Protection from harm.
 - b. The children's parenting should not be manipulated as there could be long-term consequences.
 - c. Would need to take naturally occurring variations in parenting style and investigate any differences in outcome.
4. A study to see if recall is affected by anxiety.
 - a. Protection from harm.
 - b. If the study causes a distressing level of anxiety then the participant should be allowed to withdraw.
 - c. The participant needs to be reminded of their right to withdraw at the start and end at least. Any signs of distress should lead to further offers and if necessary the researcher should stop anyway. All data should be destroyed.
5. A study to see if workplace stress increases the likelihood of heart attacks.
 - a. Confidentiality
 - b. Data on stress and medical conditions needs to be kept securely between the researcher and the participant.
 - c. Data should be stored securely (both physically and on computer) and anonymously. It should not be disclosed to a third party.
6. A study to see if the boys in an A level Psychology class do better than the girls in the same class.
 - a. Informed consent.
 - b. As the students are likely to be over 16 they can give their consent but for it to be informed they will need to know the aims of the study and be aware of how their data could be used (anonymously).
 - c. They should be given the opportunity not to participate and it must be carefully checked that they understand what is being done and why.