Ethics in Psychological Research

When a researcher asks individuals to participate in research or observes individuals without their awareness, a number of ethical issues arise. Will participants be harmed by the research? What are the benefits of the research? How will individuals’ privacy be protected? Will information provided by participants be confidential? These are important questions that researchers must address. Table 1 below outlines major ethical issues in psychological research.

*Table 1-Ethical Issues in Psychological Research*

Ethical standards Researchers follow the standards identified in the APA Ethics Code to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Institutional Review Boards Before research can begin, an IRB reviews

(IRBs) the ethics of a research project.

Risk/benefit ratio Investigators may conduct a research project if the benefits are greater than the risks.

Minimal risk Minimal risk means that the harm or discomfort in a research project is not

greater than what may be experienced in everyday life.

Confidentiality Participants’ risk of social injury (e.g., personal information becoming public) is protected by making their responses anonymous or confidential (i.e., by

using no identifying information).

Informed consent Before agreeing to participate in research, individuals learn about the nature of the research task, any risks, and the ways in which their rights will be protected.

Privacy Research participants have the right to decide how their personal information is communicated to others.

Deception Some projects may require investigators to withhold information or misinform participants about aspects of the research.

Debriefing After completing the study, researchers inform participants about the research, remove any harmful effects or misconceptions, & explain any deception.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The American Psychological Association (APA) developed an Ethics Code for individuals who conduct research, teach, conduct therapy, or serve as administrators. The Ethics Code presents standards to guide ethical behavior. For example, Section 6.09 of the APA Ethics

Code describes how researchers must seek approval before beginning their research:

*Psychologists obtain from host institutions or organizations appropriate approval prior to conducting research, and they provide accurate information about their research proposals. They conduct the research in accordance with the approved research protocol.*

This standard, and 20 others, inform researchers how to conduct their research in an ethical manner. In addition to the standards for research procedures, the Ethics Code deals with issues such as sexual harassment, fees for psychological services, test construction, classroom teaching, and expert witnesses.

Psychologists are expected to act ethically and to encourage others to act ethically. Psychology students also need to make this commitment, and should become familiar with the Ethics Code and make every effort to live up to its ideals and standards of behavior. The ethical standards in the APA’s Ethics Code tend to be general, and specific situational factors help determine how the standards are applied. Often, more than one ethical standard can be applied to a research situation, and at times the ethical standards may even appear to contradict one another. For example, ethical research requires that human participants be protected from physical injury. However, even ethical research involving drugs or other treatments may potentially harm participants. The Ethics Code also states that the welfare of animal subjects should be protected; however, certain kinds of research involve inflicting pain or other suffering on an animal. Solving these ethical dilemmas is not easy. Thus, researchers must become familiar with the ethical standards and consult with others to solve ethical problems.

In some situations, it is a legal requirement that research plans be reviewed by a committee of persons not involved in the research before the research can begin. The 1974 National Research Act requires that institutions, such as colleges and hospitals, form committees to review research sponsored by those institutions. Such committees, referred to as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), review psychological research in order to protect the rights and welfare of human participants (see Table 2). An IRB has the authority to approve, disapprove, or require modifications in a research study. Once IRB approval is obtained, the proposed research may begin.

*Table 2-Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)*

According to federal regulations, an Institutional Review Board must meet the following criteria:

1. It must include at least five members with varying backgrounds and fields of expertise.

2. It must have at least one member not affiliated with the institution (e.g., someone from the community).

3. It must include both women and men.

Nearly every college and university requires that all research conducted at the institution be reviewed by an independent committee. Violation of federal regulations regarding the review of research can stop all research at an institution, lead to the loss of federal funds, and result in large fines (Holden, 1987; Smith, 1977). Therefore, any individual who wants to do research should consult with the proper authorities, prior to starting research, about the appropriate procedure for institutional review.

THE RISK/BENEFIT RATIO

In addition to checking if ethical principles are being followed, an IRB considers the

risk/benefit ratio for a study. When deciding to do a research study, researchers and members of an IRB rely on a subjective evaluation of the costs and benefits both to individual participants and to society. Society and individuals benefit from research when new knowledge is gained and particular treatments improve the human condition. There are also potential costs if research is not conducted: New knowledge is not gained and, ultimately, opportunities to improve the human condition are lost. Research can also be costly to individual participants. For example, research participants risk injury when exposed to potentially harmful circumstances. The principal investigator must, of course, be the first one to consider these potential risks and benefits. However, before research may be conducted, the IRB considers the risk/benefit ratio.

The risk/benefit ratio asks the question, is it worth it? There are no mathematical answers for the risk/benefit ratio. Instead, the IRB asks, are the benefits greater than the risks? If the benefits seem to be greater than the risks, the research is approved. However, if the risks outweigh the benefits, the research is not approved.

In determining the risk/benefit ratio, researchers also consider whether valid and interpretable results will be produced. Rosenthal (1994) argues that when research is done poorly and has little scientific value, researchers cannot justify participants’ time spent in the study, money spent on the research, and the use of other valuable resources required for the study. Thus, an investigator has an ethical obligation to do research that meets the highest standards of scientific excellence.

When there is potential risk, a researcher must make sure there are no alternative, low-risk procedures that could be substituted. The researcher must also be sure that previous research has not already successfully addressed the research question being asked. Without careful prior review of the psychological literature, a researcher might carry out research that has already been done, thus exposing individuals to needless risk.

Determining Risk

Determining whether research participants are “at risk” illustrates the difficulties involved in ethical decision making. Life itself is risky. Commuting to work or school, crossing streets, and riding elevators have an element of risk. Simply showing up for a psychology experiment has some degree of risk. To say that human participants in psychological research can never face any risks would bring all research to a halt. Participants wouldn’t even be able to use a car, travel in a bus, or take the elevator to get to the research lab! Decisions about what constitutes risk in research must consider risks that are part of everyday life.

We must also consider the characteristics of the participants. Certain activities might pose serious risk for some individuals but not for others. Running up a flight of stairs may increase the risk of heart attack in an elderly person, but the same task probably would not be risky for most young adults. Similarly, individuals who are exceptionally depressed or anxious might show more severe reactions to certain psychological tasks than would other people. Thus, when considering risk, researchers must consider the specific populations or individuals who are likely to participate in the study.

We often think of risk as the possibility of physical injury. Frequently, however, participants in social science research risk social or psychological injury. For example, if participants’ personal information were revealed to others, a potential for social risk such as embarrassment exists. Personal information collected during psychological research may include facts about intelligence; personality traits; and political, social, or religious beliefs. A research participant probably does not want this information revealed to teachers, employers, or peers. Thus, failure to protect the confidentiality of a participant’s responses may increase the possibility of social injury.

Some psychological studies may induce serious mental or emotional stress in participants. Imagine the stress a participant may experience when smoke enters a room where she is waiting. This smoke may be created by a social psychologist to simulate an emergency. Until the true nature of the smoke is revealed, participants may experience a substantial amount of emotional stress. In addition, simply participating in a psychology experiment is anxiety-provoking for some individuals. For example, after learning a list of nonsense syllables (e.g., HAP, BEK), a student participant once said he was sure the researcher now knew a great deal about him! The student assumed the psychologist was interested in discovering his personality by examining the word associations he used when learning the list. In reality, it was a simple memory experiment designed to measure forgetting. Even here, the researcher is responsible for putting the participant’s mind at ease and for making sure he left the experiment knowing the true nature of the experiment. Thus, a researcher is obligated to protect participants from emotional or mental stress, including, when possible, stress that might arise due to participants’ misconceptions about the psychological task.

Minimal Risk

A distinction is sometimes made between a participant who is “at risk” and one who is “at Minimal risk.” Minimal risk means that the harm or discomfort participants may experience in the research is not greater than what they might experience in their daily lives or during routine physical or psychological tests. As an example of minimal risk, consider the fact that many psychology laboratory experiments involve lengthy paper-and-pencil tests intended to assess various mental abilities. Participants may be asked to complete the tests quickly, and they may receive specific feedback about their performance. Although there is likely to be stress in this situation, the risk of psychological injury is probably no greater than that of being a student. Completing paper-and-pencil tests and receiving feedback is a routine part of a student’s life. Therefore, college students would be judged to experience only minimal risk in such experiments.

When the possibility of injury is judged to be more than minimal, individuals are considered to be at risk. When this occurs, more serious obligations fall on the researcher to protect the welfare of such participants.

Dealing with Risk

Even if the potential risk is small, researchers should try to minimize risk and protect participants. For instance, simply by stating at the beginning of a memory experiment that the tasks do not measure intelligence or personality reduces the stress that some participants experience. In order to protect research participants from social injury, data collection should keep participants’ responses anonymous by asking individuals not to use their names or any identifying information. When this is not possible, researchers should keep participants’ responses confidential by removing any identifying information from their responses during the research task. This situation arises when individuals participate in several sessions of an investigation or when individuals provide their name so they can receive course credit for participating. Thus, a researcher should obtain information about participants in a manner that does not require individuals to be identified, or the researcher should remove any identifying information.

Making sure participants’ responses are anonymous or confidential can also benefit the researcher if this leads participants to be more honest and open when responding. Participants will be less likely to lie or withhold information if they do not worry about who will have access to their responses.

INFORMED CONSENT

Successful psychological research depends on the willingness of students, patients, clients, and other members of the community to take part in scientific investigations. In some research, participants are given money or other compensation for their time and effort. Often, people simply volunteer to participate in research with no compensation. In either case, researcher and participant enter into a social contract. The contract may be informal—for example, a verbal agreement may be made. In other circumstances, the contract includes written statements signed by both researcher and participant, and possibly witnesses. As part of this research contract, a researcher has an ethical responsibility to make clear to the participant what the research entails, including any possible risk to the participant, and to respect the dignity and rights of the individual during the research experience.

The research participant also has an ethical responsibility to behave in an appropriate manner—for example, by paying attention to instructions and by performing tasks in the manner requested by the researcher. In other words, lying, cheating, or otherwise fraudulent behavior by research participants violates the scientific integrity of the research situation.

Ethical research practice requires that research participants be informed of all features of the research that might be expected to influence their willingness to participate. The researcher must respond to any questions individuals have about the research. By doing this, participants can make an informed decision about their participation. Participants should also be informed that they are free to withdraw their consent at any time without penalty or prejudice. Consent must be given freely, without undue inducement or pressure. Written informed consent is absolutely essential when participants are exposed to more than minimal risk.

True informed consent cannot be obtained from certain individuals, such as the mentally impaired or emotionally disturbed, young children, and those who have limited ability to understand the nature of research and the possible risks. In these cases, consent must be obtained from the participants’ parents or legal guardians. They, too, must be informed fully about the nature of the research, they must be allowed to withdraw consent without any negative consequences, and their consent must be given freely without any undue inducement or pressure.

In some situations it is not necessary to obtain informed consent. For example, informed consent is not required when researchers simply observe individuals’ behavior in public places and do not identify specific individuals. An investigator, for instance, may gather evidence about race relations on a college campus by observing the frequency of mixed-race vs. unmixed-race groups sitting at tables in the college cafeteria. Such student behavior can be considered public, and the method is naturalistic observation. However, deciding what is public or private is not always easy.

Privacy is the right of individuals to decide how information about them is communicated to others. Diener and Crandall (1978) identify three major dimensions to consider when deciding what information is private: sensitivity of the information, setting, and dissemination of the information. Clearly, some information is sensitive. Individuals interviewed about their sexual practices, religious beliefs, or criminal activities are likely to be very concerned about how their information will be used.

The setting also plays a role in deciding whether behavior is public or private. Some behaviors, such as attending a baseball game, can reasonably be considered public. In public settings, individuals give up a certain degree of privacy. Some behaviors that occur in public settings, however, are not easily classified as public or private. When you ride in your car, use a public bathroom, or enjoy a family picnic in the park, are these behaviors public or private? Decisions about ethical research in these situations depend on the sensitivity of the information being gathered and the manner in which the information will be disseminated. When information is disseminated using statistical averages or proportions, it is unlikely to reveal much about specific individuals’ behaviors. In other situations, code systems can be used to protect participants’ confidentiality. Dissemination of sensitive information about individuals or groups without their permission is a serious breach of ethics.

As in other areas when ethical dilemmas arise, researchers must seek advice from knowledgeable individuals regarding the appropriateness of their procedures. Decisions regarding what is public vs. private behavior and procedures for obtaining informed consent should always be made with the goal of protecting the rights of research participants.

DECEPTION IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The most controversial ethical issue related to research is deception. Deception can occur when information is withheld from participants or when participants are intentionally misinformed about an aspect of the research. Some people argue that research participants should never be deceived because ethical practice requires that the relationship between experimenter and participant be open and honest (e.g., Baumrind, 1985). Deception contradicts the principle of informed consent. Despite the increased attention given to deception in research over the past couple of decades, the use of deception in psychological research has not declined and remains a popular research strategy.

*Table 3-Pros & Cons of Deception*

Pros

* Deception allows researchers to study individuals’ natural behavior.
* Deception allows opportunities to investigate behaviors and mental processes not easily studied using non-deceptive methods.

Cons

* Deception contradicts the principle of informed consent.
* The relationship between researcher and participant is not open and honest.
* Frequent use of deception may make individuals suspicious about research and psychology

How is it that deception is still widely used, despite ethical controversies? One reason is that it is impossible to conduct certain kinds of research without withholding information about some aspects of the research. In other situations, it is necessary to misinform participants in order to have them adopt certain attitudes or behaviors. This was true in Kassin and Kiechel’s (1996) study of false confession. If participants had known that the procedures were trying to elicit their false confessions, they probably would not have confessed. It is important to remember that although deception is sometimes justified on methodological grounds, deceiving participants for the purpose of getting them to participate in research in which they would not normally take part, or research that involves serious risk, is always unethical.

A goal of research is to observe individuals’ normal behavior. A basic assumption underlying the use of deception is that sometimes it’s necessary to conceal the true nature of an experiment so that participants will behave as they normally would, or so they will act according to the instructions provided by the experimenter. A problem occurs, however, with frequent and casual use of deception (Kelman, 1967). If people believe that researchers often mislead participants, they may expect to be deceived when participating in a psychology experiment. Individuals’ suspicions about the research may prevent them from behaving as they normally would. This is exactly the opposite of what researchers hope to achieve.

Therefore, it’s important that researchers use deception only in very special circumstances. Deception is justified only when the study is very important, when no other methods for conducting the research are available, and when the deception would not influence individuals’ decision to participate (Kelman, 1972). When deception is used, the researcher must inform participants after the experiment of the reasons for the deception, discuss any misconceptions they may have, and remove any harmful effects of the deception. One goal of this debriefing is to educate the participant about the need for deception in the study. Research on deception in psychological research has shown that, on the average, participants do not appear to react negatively to being deceived (e.g., Christensen, 1988; Epley & Huff, 1998; Kimmel, 1996) and that, although suspiciousness about psychological research may increase, the overall effects seem to be small (see Kimmel, 1998). This seems to be the case in Kassin and Kiechel’s (1996) study, as participants reported that the study was meaningful and their own contribution was valuable.

Beginning researchers sometimes believe that unless they tell participants *exactly* what they expect to find (that is, the hypothesis being tested), they are deceiving participants. This is not necessarily the case. Information about the specific hypothesis being tested is often withheld from participants in order not to bias them to behave in a certain way. In most situations, good research procedures include *not* telling participants exactly what the researcher is testing. Of course, the researcher can never ethically withhold information that might seriously influence a participant’s willingness to participate (APA Ethical Standard 6.15). Debriefing provides an opportunity to inform participants about the specific goals of a study and to educate them about the need to do psychological research.

ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Over the years, many researchers have fallen into the trap of viewing human participants in research as “objects” from which to obtain data in order to meet their own research goals. It is important to remember that the subjects of research are human.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

Participants should be able to leave a study at any time if they feel uncomfortable. They should also be allowed to withdraw their data. They should be informed at the start of the study that they have the right, at any time, to withdraw. Participants should not be made to feel they shouldn’t withdraw as this may ‘spoil’ the study. Often, participants are paid or receive course credits, they may worry they won’t get this if they withdraw. That worry should be eliminated at the onset. Even at the end of the study the participant should be given a final opportunity to withdraw the data they have provided for the research.

Researchers sometimes have considered that their responsibility to participants ends when the final data are collected. A handshake or “thank-you” was frequently all that marked the end of the research session. Participants likely left with unanswered questions about the research situation and with only the vaguest idea of their role in the study. It is important when planning and conducting research to consider how the experience may affect the research participant *after* the research is completed, and to seek ways in which the participant will benefit from participation. These concerns follow directly from the moral principle of respect for individuals. Earlier we discussed that protecting the confidentiality of a participant’s responses benefits both the participant (e.g., by safeguarding him or her from social injury) and the researcher (e.g., by increasing the probability of honest responding). Debriefing participants at the end of a research session benefits both participants and researchers (Blanck et al., 1992). Debriefing is necessary to remove any harmful effects or misconceptions about participation, and to explain to participants the need for deception. Debriefing also has the important goals of educating participants about the research (rationale, method, results) and leaving them with positive feelings about their participation. Researchers should provide opportunities for participants to learn more about their particular contribution to the research study and to feel more personally involved in the scientific process.

Debriefing is an opportunity for participants to learn more about research methods in general. Because the educational value of participation in psychological research is used to justify the use of large numbers of volunteers from college introductory psychology classes, researchers testing students have an important obligation to educate participants about psychological research. However, it is unethical to *require* research participation (e.g., as a course requirement). Therefore, psychology departments with a “subject pool” must also offer an alternative experience for students to learn about research in psychology.

Debriefing also helps researchers learn how participants viewed the procedures in the study. A researcher may wish to know whether a particular experimental procedure was perceived by the participant in the way the investigator intended (Blanck et al., 1992). For example, a study of how people respond to failure may include tasks that are impossible to complete. However, if participants

don’t judge their performance as a failure, the researcher’s hypotheses cannot be tested. Debriefing allows the investigator to find out how participants perceived their performance on the task.

When trying to learn participants’ perceptions of the experiment, researchers shouldn’t press them too hard. Research participants generally want to help with the scientific process, and they may fear that they will “ruin” the research if they reveal their guesses about the experiment. Thus, debriefing should be informal and indirect (see Box 3.4). The investigator should use general questions with an open-ended format (e.g., What do you think this study was about?). More specific questions can be used to follow up participants’ responses, but these questions should not cue the participant about what responses are expected.

Debriefing also benefits researchers because it can provide clues to the reasons for participants’ performance, which may help researchers interpret the results of the study or may provide ideas for another study. Errors in experimental materials such as missing information or ambiguous instructions are sometimes detected during debriefing. As previously mentioned, debriefing is good for both the participant and the scientist.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT ETHICAL ISSUES

Should research participants be placed at risk of serious injury to learn about bystander apathy? Should psychologists use deception to learn about false confessions? These questions require answers; however, you know by now that the answers are not easy. It’s often not clear what the “right” answer is or even if there is a right answer.

What are the steps to take when making ethical decisions about research? By following a series of steps, researchers can think critically about the ethical issues involved in conducting research. Critical thinking about these issues will help protect the rights and welfare of humans and participants. The following are steps based on reading the ethics literature, and discussions with philosophers involved in ethical decision making.

STEPS FOR ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

**1.** Find out all the facts of the situation. In other words, determine exactly what is involved in terms of procedure, nature of participants, and so on.

**2.** Identify the ethical issues that are relevant. An important part of this inquiry will be consulting ethical guidelines that are available, such as the APA Ethics Code, as well as policy statements from various professional organizations. Also, make sure that you are aware of state and federal regulations or laws in this area.

**3.** Decide what is at stake for all parties involved (participants, researchers, institutions). This will mean taking different viewpoints—for example, by asking what is at stake from a scientific point of view, from society’s viewpoint, from the view of participants, and from an overall moral viewpoint.

**4.** Identify alternative methods or procedures, discussing the consequences of each alternative, including their ethical implications. As part of this discussion, consider the consequences of *not* doing

the proposed research. Examine the practical constraints of each alternative.

**5.** Decide on the action to be taken. Judge the “correctness” of the decision not in terms of whether it makes you feel happy (you may not) but, rather, in terms of the process that was followed. Is it the best that can be done given the circumstances?