

## Psychology 12

### Ethics

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#### What is Ethics?

Ethics is the branch of study dealing with what is the proper course of action for humans. It answers the question, "What do I do?" It is the study of right and wrong in human endeavors. At a more fundamental level, it is the method by which we categorize our values and pursue them. Do we pursue our own happiness, or do we sacrifice ourselves to a greater cause? Is that foundation of ethics based on the Bible, or on the very nature of humans himself or herself, or neither?

Landauer, J. & Rowlands, J., (2001). Ethics. *Importance of Philosophy*. Retrieved from: [http://www.importanceofphilosophy.com/Ethics\\_Main.html](http://www.importanceofphilosophy.com/Ethics_Main.html)

### Ethics in Psychology

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Ethics are very important when carrying out any type of psychological research. Before we can begin any research method it is vital that we stick to an ethical code of practice, as we will be dealing with people. Ethics refers to the correct rules of conduct necessary when carrying out research. We have a moral responsibility to protect research participants from harm.

The British Psychological Society (BPS) has issued a code of ethics in psychology that provides guidelines for the conduct of research. Some of the more important ethical issues are as follows:

#### Informed Consent

Before the study begins the researcher must outline to the participants what the research is about, and then ask their consent (i.e. permission) to take part. However, it is not always possible to gain informed consent. This is acceptable as long as what happens to the participants is something that could easily happen to them in everyday life. For example, if the research involves observing people in a bus queue, those people may be observed by anyone when they are in the queue.

Participants must be given information relating to:

- Purpose of the research.
- Procedures involved in the research.
- All foreseeable risks and discomforts to the subject. These include not only physical injury but also possible psychological.
- Benefits of the research to society and possibly to the individual human subject.
- Length of time the subject is expected to participate.
- Person to contact for answers to questions or in the event of injury or emergency.

**Debrief**

Participants must be thoroughly debriefed at the end of the study. They must be given a general idea of what the researcher was investigating and why, and their part in the research should be explained. They must be told if they have been deceived and given reasons why. They must be asked if they have any questions and those questions should be answered honestly and as fully as possible.

**Protection of Participants**

Researchers must ensure that those taking part in research will not be caused distress. They must be protected from physical and mental harm. This means you must not embarrass, frighten, offend or ham participants. Normally, the risk of harm must be no greater than in ordinary life, i.e. participants should not be exposed to risks greater than or additional to those encountered in their normal lifestyles.

**Deception**

This is where participants are misled or wrongly informed about the aims of the research. For example, in Milgram's study of obedience the participants thought they were giving electric shocks to a learner when they answered a question wrong. In reality no shocks were given and the learners were confederates of Milgram. This is sometimes necessary in order to avoid demand characteristics (i.e. the clues in an experiment which lead participants to think they know what the researcher is looking for).

However, participants must be deceived as little as possible, and any deception must not cause distress. If you have gained participants' informed consent by deception then they will have agreed to take part without actually knowing what they were consenting to. The true nature of the research should be revealed at the earliest possible opportunity, or at least during debriefing. If the participant is likely to object or be distressed once they discover the true nature of the research at debriefing, then the study is unacceptable.

**Objections to deception**

- Violates individual's right to choose to participate.
- A questionable basis on which to build a discipline.
- Leads to distrust of psychology in the community.

**Confidentiality**

Participants, and the data gained from them must be kept anonymous unless they give their full consent. No names must be used in a research report.

**Withdrawal from an Investigation**

From the very start of an investigation, participants must be aware of their right to stop participating in the study. Even at the end of the study the participant has a final opportunity to withdraw the data they have provided for the research.

## **Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)**

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Four general goals of ethics codes:

- Help establish the group as a profession
- To act as a support and a guide to individual professionals
- To help meet the responsibilities of being a profession
- To provide a statement of moral principle that helps the individual professional to resolve ethical dilemmas

CPA has four ethical principles that registered psychologists in Canada must follow. They are ranked in order of importance, so that when they are in conflict, the practitioner has a guideline to follow.

1. Respect for the dignity of persons
  - a. Research participants, clients and patients are treated with dignity and are not subject to embarrassment of any kind.
2. Responsible caring
  - a. The practitioner or researcher takes responsibility to care for the research participant, client or patient.
3. Integrity in relationships
  - a. The practitioner or researcher values the relationship with the research participant, client or patient.
4. Responsibility to society
  - a. The practitioner or researcher has a responsibility also to society to do what is best for the population at large.

Seitz, J., and O'Neil, P. (year). Ethical decision-making and the Code of Ethics of the Canadian Psychological Association. *Canadian Psychology* 37(1), 23-30.