

Ethical issues in psychological research

This chapter deals with two major sets of responsibilities borne by professional psychologists, whether their work is applied or research oriented.

First, psychologists have responsibilities, as members of a research community, to publish only well-founded and genuine results with conventional support, open to analysis by colleagues. They also need to pay attention to the possible social effects of research results and assess these in the prevailing moral and political climate.

Second, they need to follow strict ethical principles, such as those devised by the British Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association, when working with both research participants and clients in a professional capacity. Issues or procedures applying to research participants include:

- confidentiality,
- anonymity,
- privacy,
- informed consent,
- deception (which can lower the public's trust in psychological research),
- debriefing (informing participants and returning them to their pre-test state),
- mental and physical stress and discomfort,
- recognition of participants' rights to withdraw (from the study or their data later),
- the special power of the investigator,
- problems with involuntary participation and intervention.

Students, too, need to conduct their research according to these principles. There are various techniques that can be used to gain information that guarantee privacy and confidentiality, and several have been suggested for avoiding the need to deceive, but psychology has the peculiar characteristic that informing people of what is being tested has the effect of altering their likely 'natural' behaviour.

The arguments for and against *animal research* are also outlined.

Introduction

Both the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the American Psychological Association (APA) have agreed guidelines on the ethical issues involved in psychological research. The BPS has developed its Code of Ethics and Conduct which became effective in 2006 and was revised in 2009.¹ It is based on four major Ethical Principles – respect, competence, responsibility, integrity – and each of these is expanded in a Statement of Values (see Table 11.1) and then elaborated into a large and comprehensive set of ‘shoulds’ for practising psychologists, research or applied. To address the growing amount of research conducted over the internet, in 2007 the BPS also introduced a set of Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research.² In 2010 the BPS published The Code of Human Research Ethics,³ which is oriented particularly towards research with human participants and contains advice specifically aimed at the conduct of research by psychology students on undergraduate programmes, typically a final year independent research project – see Box 11.1. All psychological research studies carried out in academic institutions are now subject to ethical review by qualified staff members and this now includes research carried out independently by undergraduates.

Info Box 11.1

Code of Human Research Ethics – the student research section

- Section 11 of the Code recommends that projects to be conducted by students should be reviewed by at least two members of staff, one of whom is a Society member.
- Students should complete an ethics submission procedure – this serves two purposes. It is a training exercise and also ‘as for any other ethics submission, it is a formal exercise that seeks to protect participants, researchers and other stakeholders from harm.’ (BPS, 2010: 87)
- Research carried out as a class exercise (the sort of things students participate in during their regular workshops as teaching exercises) should ideally be subject to generic ethical approval by staff. However, students should also complete at least one ethics review in order to learn about the ethical issues involved in carrying out psychological research. Lab classes can involve significant ethical issues, as when students need to be advised that a drink (e.g., Pepsi) contains caffeine or when they need reassurance after one group, say, has been given very difficult problems to solve.
- Ethical review of project proposals should also include a consideration of their scientific worth and quality in order to avoid wasteful replication and the conduct of trivial research.

Find this at: www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards

www.bps.org.uk/publications/policy-and-guidelines/research-guidelines-policy-documents/research-guidelines-poli

www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_human_research_ethics.pdf

The APA's (2002) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct⁴ is a very comprehensive document, which provides five General Principles for overall guidance towards 'the highest ideals of psychology'. These concern: beneficence and non-maleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, justice and respect for people's rights and dignity. It also lists detailed Standards in specific areas of psychology which, unlike the General Principles, are 'enforceable'. The general public can bring complaints to the ethics committee, which then adjudicates. The psychologist concerned can be reprimanded, dismissed, or required to alter behavior or attend relevant training. This breadth of principles and disciplinary power reflects the far wider application of psychology to the general public as consumers in the USA. Most of the major applied principles are similar to those that are relevant in the doctor-patient relationship.

The 2009 BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct brings together for the first time all the issues concerning treatment of research participants (including physical and mental protection of participants, informed consent, deception, debriefing, withdrawal from an investigation, confidentiality, anonymity) and those concerned with the treatment of clients in psychological practice (e.g., by a clinical or occupational psychologist) including the monitoring of colleagues' behaviour in the interests of the profession as a whole. Table 11.1 shows the statement of values for each of the major principles.

Both the British and US principles stress that psychological research should lead to better understanding of ourselves, and to the enhancement of the human condition and promotion of human welfare. Both stress the need for an atmosphere of free inquiry in order to generate the widest, most valid, body of knowledge. But both also stress that this free atmosphere requires a commitment to responsibility on the part of the psychologist in terms of competence, objectivity and the welfare of research participants.

Respect	Psychologists value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over clients, and with particular regard to people's rights including those of privacy and self-determination.
Competence	Psychologists value the continuing development and maintenance of high standards of competence in their professional work, and the importance of preserving their ability to function optimally within the recognised limits of their knowledge, skill, training, education and experience.
Responsibility	Psychologists value their responsibilities to clients, to the general public, and to the profession and science of Psychology, including the avoidance of harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contributions to society.
Integrity	Psychologists value honesty, accuracy, clarity and fairness in their interactions with all persons, and seek to promote integrity in all facets of their scientific and professional endeavours.

Table 11.1 The four Ethical Principles and associated Statements of Value from the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct, 2006, 2009.

4 Find this at: www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx

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Since 1987, the Royal Charter of the BPS has been amended, taking us some way towards the US model described above. The BPS now maintains a 'Register of Chartered Psychologists'. These are people who practise psychology either in an applied or a research capacity. Members of the register use the formal letters 'C. Psychol', can be struck off for unprofessional behaviour and, it is hoped, will become recognised as bona fide 'trademarked' practitioners whom the general public can recognise and trust. All centres (e.g., universities, hospitals) that conduct psychological research activity have in place an ethics committee to vet research proposals (of staff and students) for unacceptable procedures in any of the areas we are about to consider.

Publication and access to data

What gets published

Before taking a look at the rights and protection of individual participants and clients, we can consider how psychologists are expected to commit themselves to accessible and open information related to their research. In general, a psychologist cannot claim to have demonstrated an effect and then withhold raw data or information on procedures and samples used. Persons who do this are generally considered to be charlatans. Where psychologists are prepared, as most are, to be completely open with their data, they would still not allow the alleged results of their work to affect people's lives, by policy formulation for instance, before the research community has thoroughly verified, evaluated and replicated results where possible. They should not 'rush to publish' – see Box 11.2.

Info Box 11.2 How to increase the incidence of measles

Some years ago minimal research was published alleging a link between the MMR immunisation and autism. Even though the theoretical connection was swiftly discredited (see e.g., Potter, 2005; Honda *et al.*, 2005) with the paper being retracted by *The Lancet*⁵ in 2010 and declared fraudulent by the *BMJ* (Godlee, Smith and Marcovitch, 2011), this resulted in a significant decrease in parents having their children immunised with the MMR vaccine. Consequently, recent years have seen an increase in cases of these diseases, especially measles which, according to the UK's Health Protection Agency, rose by 31% from 2006 to 2007 (from 740 to 971 cases)⁶ and the increase was maintained with 1,086 England and Wales cases in 2011, though happily vaccination rates had reached an all-time high of 92%⁷ after dropping to around 80% in 2003/4 (Thompson, 2009). Although this is not an example directly from psychological research it exemplifies the dangers of publishing tentative research on public issues that the media will report without the usual scientific reservations and to which an ill-informed public will respond.

⁵ See *The Lancet*, Volume 375, Issue 9713, p. 445, 6 February 2010.

⁶ www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&HPAwebStandard/HPAweb_C/1218093967161?p=1204186170287

⁷ www.hpa.org.uk/hpr/archives/2012/news1512.htm

There are occasions, in fact, when any scientist may feel that publication of results is potentially harmful, or even dangerous. It was noted in Chapters 1 and 9 that there are several incidents of withholding crucial data associated with the heated debate around the extent to which 'intelligence' (often limited to the narrow construct of IQ) might be inherited. The political implications of this debate are profound. For example, do we nurture and provide compensatory support for 'slow' developers? Alternatively, do we simply accept that intellectual differences largely reflect unalterable genetic variations within society, and consequently make arrangements by, for instance, providing different 'tiers' of education?

The debate is closely linked to the hottest potato of them all: race differences in IQ, the controversy sparked by Jensen (1969) and renewed again by Herrnstein and Murray (1994). The debate is not just academic. Governments would like to have answers or, rather, would often like 'expert' support in their policies from psychologists. Sir Cyril Burt's data (1972) on the intelligence of identical twins, appeared to provide very strong evidence for the genetic role in human intellectual abilities. The early findings played a part in the political debate that produced the British '11-plus' examination and a two-tier (originally three-tier) secondary education system, wherein the successful 20% of children passing the exam received a grammar-school education. Only after Burt's death did Leon Kamin (1977) establish beyond doubt that Burt's data were inconsistent, to a degree way beyond acceptability, and probably fraudulent. Kamin demonstrated that Burt was persistently vague about the exact tests in use and had not made it at all easy to check his raw data. The cult of the 'great expert' had also inhibited investigation of Burt's work by 'lesser' researchers. Although Burt's overall work, to some degree, became rehabilitated in the psychological establishment during the 1990s, his contribution and data on IQ and inheritance will remain permanently unacceptable and controversial (e.g., see Joynson, 2003).

Burt's data have been far from the only problem in this area, however. It seems an unlikely coincidence that, in this same arena of debate, Kamin also experienced decades of resistance from Jensen in providing the data referred to in Chapter 1, and met with complete resistance from Bouchard *et al.*, who claimed (1990) remarkable similarities between identical twins 'reared apart, from birth', a theme that has advanced well beyond sober psychological research to participants in the research having agents, wide media coverage and the making of Hollywood films. Kamin questions the extent to which the 'separated' twins really saw or knew nothing of each other, yet Bouchard consistently refuses to provide detailed case histories.

Psychological researchers, and science in general, just cannot afford to work with this kind of resistance to public check. Unfortunately, the general public are not always so astute or concerned about integrity. The drama of the identical twins can swamp the academic subtleties. The lure of buying vitamins to improve their child's intelligence can blind parents to the doubts of psychologists who oppose this proposed link. Psychological researchers have an overriding responsibility to honour the scientific endeavour over the attractions of media exposure and fame.

Where to publish

Psychologists also need to exercise integrity over *where* they publish. Billig (1979) produced evidence of clear links between certain publications in which psychologists published articles during the height of the race IQ debate and extreme racist opinions and activity. *The Mankind Quarterly*, whose editorial board has included Raymond Cattell, Arthur Jensen and Richard Lynn, the last as editor, was investigated in great detail and Billig's work is confirmed by Richards. Tucker (1994, 2007) also confirms many extreme racist connections and makes clear that the journal was long supported, directly or indirectly, by the Pioneer Fund, a US white supremacist organisation, and has had a succession of far-right editors and close associations with members of neo-Nazi organisations (see Tucker, 1994). Contents have concentrated on articles stressing 'race' difference, sometimes breathtakingly global (see, for example, Lynn, 1991b) even though there is no genetic distinction between traditionally and crudely identified 'racial' groups.⁸

Findings on 'racial' difference (in intelligence or personality, for instance) almost always stir up controversy, which is hardly surprising. For this reason some psychologists have been led to argue that a moratorium should be held on publication. They argue that, since 'race' is always inextricably bound up with culture and socio-economic position, most responsible researchers would announce results with great qualification. However, they cannot then stop the lay racist or ignorant reader from using the unqualified information in discriminatory or abusive practices.

Psychologists have also argued that professional psychological researchers should exercise integrity over the sources of their funding, increasingly likely to come from industry or other organisations with an interest in the non-academic use of findings. The Pioneer Fund, for instance, either directly or through intermediate organisations, is alleged to have funded Arthur Jensen, William Shockley, J. Philippe Rushton, Hans Eysenck and Richard Lynn, all to at least six-figure sums (Connolly, 1994, Richards, 1997; Tucker, 2007).

The conduct of research with human participants

Any discussion of ethical principles in psychological research inevitably throws up Milgram's (1974) famous demonstrations of obedience fairly early on in the proceedings. Several ethical issues are involved in this study. Almost certainly, you will already have heard about the experiment but if not have a look at Box 11.3.

Pause for thought

List the aspects of this investigation you consider to be unethical. Should the investigation have been carried out at all? Do the ends (scientific and surprising knowledge) justify the means?

⁸ See The Human Genome Project as reported in, e.g., *Science* magazine, 16 February 2001, Vol. 291, p. 1218.

Info Box 11.3

Milgram (1963) – the classic experiment for ethical debate

Volunteers were introduced to another 'participant' who was actually an experimental confederate. The volunteer became a 'teacher' who was asked to administer electric shocks, increasing by 15 volts for each mistake made by the confederate; 375 volts was described as 'Danger: severe shock'. A tape recording of screams and refusals deceived the teacher-participant into believing the confederate was experiencing great pain and wished to end the session. The teacher-participant was pressured into continuing by 'prods' from the experimenter such as 'The experiment requires that you continue' and 'You have no choice but to go on.' To Milgram's surprise, 65% of participants delivered shocks to the end of the scale (450 volts) even though the confederate had ceased responding at 315 volts. Milgram had consulted 'experienced and disinterested colleagues' – psychiatrists predicted that no more than 0.1% would obey to the end. The teacher-participant often displayed extreme anxiety; one even suffered a mild seizure. One observer of the experiment wrote that an initially poised businessman was reduced within 20 minutes to a 'twitching, stuttering wreck' who was so agonised that he appeared to be approaching a nervous collapse (Milgram (1963)). The results of this demonstration were used to argue that many ordinary people are capable of behaving in a manner, under pressure, that is retrospectively considered cruel. Atrocities are not necessarily carried out by purely evil persons or 'cultures'.

Deception

Milgram's participants were grossly deceived. Not only did they believe they were shocking an innocent victim and that the victim suffered terribly, but also the whole purpose of the research was completely distorted as concerning the effects of punishment on learning.

DECEPTION is commonly agreed by psychologists to involve the deliberate provision of incorrect information, whereas most agree that simply withholding information about the aims of a study is not deception. In Loftus and Palmer's classic 1974 study of eyewitness memory all participants viewed a video of a car accident. Some were asked 'About how fast were the cars going when they hit each other?' while others were asked the same question but with 'smashed into' substituted for 'hit'. This is not deception but of course participants cannot be given *full* information about the questions or we would never know whether changing the wording has any effect on how participants recall the speed of the impact.

Standard 8.07 of the APA Ethical Principles claims that psychologists only use deception when it is scientifically justifiable and where no feasible non-deceptive alternative exists. However, Hertwig and Ortmann (2008) argue that this is difficult to reconcile with the high number of studies that still use deception after the peak of their use in the 1960s and 1970s. They show (2008) that although use of deception in studies reported in two major research journals dropped from 75% of articles in the late 1970s to a low point in 1987–8 of around 25–30%, in 2002 53% of articles in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* used deception, as did 42% of the articles in the 1996 volume of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. These are both highly prestigious journals in the area of social psychology and it does not appear as though deception is being used merely as a last resort.

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In 1997 Ortmann and Hertwig argued that the widespread use of deception was in danger of creating distrust of psychologists and their experiments. Psychology students as participants might become resentful of having been duped by researchers, thus becoming unco-operative. Students' future performances in research studies might become distorted by the effects of suspicion. Long before Ortmann and Hertwig's revival of this argument Ring, Wallston and Corey (1970) decided to evaluate the consequences to the participant in a study which, even though the investigators were critical of Milgram, not only included the deceptions of the original study but also used a dishonest primary *debriefing* (see below) before a second, honest one. They showed that an initial, superficial debriefing dramatically reduces any negative participant evaluation of the research. However, they also found that one-third of participants reported residual anger and disappointment with themselves even after the second, complete debriefing. The fact that even a few participants felt quite negative about themselves well after the experiment, and that many participants felt extremely upset during it, has led many researchers to the position that these levels of extreme deception and stress are ethically unacceptable.

Contrasting with Ring *et al.*'s finding, however, are the data produced by Milgram himself after sending a post-study questionnaire to his participants. Eighty four per cent said they were glad to have participated, whereas only 1% regretted being involved, the remainder reporting neutral feelings. A total of 80% believed more research like Milgram's should be carried out, while 75% found the experience meaningful and self-enlightening. Some writers discounted this broad range of appreciative and illuminating comments, however, as an attempt by Milgram to justify an ethically unacceptable study.

Besides the question of ethics, it is unwise of investigators to indulge in a great deal of deception. Students very often suspect that the manifest structure and explanation of a study in which they participate is false. Ring *et al.* found that 50% of their participants claimed they would be more wary and suspicious of psychology experiments in the future. As Reason and Rowan (1981) put it, 'Good research means never having to say you are sorry.' The problem of suspicious participants is dramatically illustrated in Box 11.4.

Info Box 11.4 Does deception breed suspicion?

Hertwig and Ortmann (2008: 70) argue that participants *do* become suspicious of procedures in research studies and cite this rather convincing example of participants not believing the ostensible nature of a study in which they were involved.

Take, for example, the following incident. In the middle of a mock jury study, one of the six jurors experienced a genuine epileptic seizure reminiscent of the feigned seizure that served as a manipulation in a classic study by Darley and Latané (1968). The experimenters, MacCoun and Kerr (1987), reported that 'three of the five subjects spontaneously reported that they had questioned the authenticity of the attack' (p. 199) and that 'there were indications that prior knowledge of psychological research, derived primarily from course work, was related to suspicion' (p. 199). The only person who promptly came to the victim's aid had no prior psychology coursework, whereas 'two of the other bystanders reported looking for hidden observers even as they joined in administering aid' (p. 199).

Hertwig and Ortmann's concerns were challenged by several authors including Broeder (1998), Kimmel (1998) and Weiss (2001) who argued that evidence suggests participants do not generally become resentful, that the effects of suspiciousness have a negligible effect on future participants' performances and that deception as a research tool 'is necessary and not necessarily evil' (Weiss, 2001). However, Hertwig and Ortmann's 2008 article counters these claims with strong arguments and evidence. Their conclusion is that the evidence is mixed and that the concerns about the damaging effects of deception cannot so easily be dismissed. They suggest that researchers might always probe for suspicion at the end of their research studies and even might consider excluding data from participants who have previously been subjected to deception. They also suggest that the APA could lobby journal editors to 'impose more transparent and stricter rules on the submission of studies incorporating deception' (p. 85) by requiring researchers to justify their use of deception according to clear and stringent criteria which the editors themselves might develop.

Besides these suggestions from Hertwig and Ortmann, and in keeping with the general principles of the Code of Ethics and Conduct, research psychologists can consult with disinterested colleagues as to the seriousness of the deception and any feasible alternatives. Second, *debriefing* should be very carefully attended to (see below). Third, in some cases it is possible to obtain permission to deceive. Volunteers can be asked to select what sort of research they would be prepared to participate in, from for instance:

- research on recognition of commercial products,
- research on safety of products,
- research in which you will be misled about the purpose until afterwards,
- research involving questions on attitudes.

If potential participants tick the box for the third item then it can be concluded that they agree to deception, although there would still be an ethical issue if the deception led to mental harm or possible humiliation.

It should be remembered that much deception is fairly innocuous. For instance: some participants are told a baby is male, others that it is female, and their descriptions of it are compared; children are told not to play with a toy because it belongs to another child who is next door; students are told their experimental rats are 'bright'; an observer, placed in a testing situation to see if they increase participants' errors, is introduced simply as someone who is noting details of the performance.

Debriefing

In all research studies, the investigator has a responsibility to DEBRIEF each participant. After participation the true purpose and aims of the study are revealed and every attempt is made to ensure that participants feel the same about themselves when they leave as they did when they arrived. In Johnston and Davey's (1997) experiment (described in Chapter 4), for example, some participants watched a negative news tape that was recognised by the researchers as possibly

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emotionally disturbing. For this reason they asked participants in that condition to listen to two minutes of a relaxation tape on a personal stereo before telling them all about the study and giving them their fee.

Where participants have been seriously deceived, this responsibility incurs a substantial effort in reassurance and explanation. The debriefing itself may have to involve a little more deception, as when children are told they 'did very well indeed' whatever the actual standard of their performance, and when any suspicion that a participant really is 'poorly adjusted' is not communicated to them. In Milgram's experiments, participants who went to the end of the scale were told that some people did this 'quite gleefully'. The idea was to help the obedient participants compare their own unwillingness to proceed, and their experienced anxiety, fairly favourably with the fictitious happily obedient participants. (Milgram never reported that any participant *did* proceed happily). Even with this comparison, at least 26 out of 40 participants knew, when they left, that they were capable, under pressure, of inflicting extreme pain, if not death, on an innocent human being. It hardly seems possible that these people left the laboratory feeling the same about themselves as they did before they entered.

Stress and discomfort

There is no argument against the principle that psychological investigators should guarantee the safety of their participants, and that everything possible should be done to protect them from harm or discomfort. The difficulty comes in trying to decide what kind of stress or discomfort, physical or mental, is unacceptable. Humanists and others might argue that *any* traditional experimental research on 'subjects' is an affront to human dignity. At a lesser extreme, those who see value in the human experimental procedure have nevertheless criticised some investigators for going too far.

Mental stress

Participants have been told that test results demonstrate that they are poorly adjusted. Female participants have been given feedback that they are considered attractive or unattractive by the man who will later interview them. Bramel (1962) led participants to believe that their emotional reaction to photographs indicated a homosexual tendency. Participants in Latané and Darley's (1976) experiments thought they were overhearing an authentic epileptic seizure. A further example, causing some dissent, was provided by a study from Sears, Rau and Alpert, 1965, in which a child was asked to guard the experimenter's pet hamster, which was then removed from its cage through a hole in the floor when the child was distracted by attractive toys. Zimbardo's (1972) prison experiment is briefly described on p. 150 and invoked possibly more serious concerns even than Milgram's studies.

More recent examples of studies invoking mental stress are those where women are exposed to media images of 'ideally' thin women and then asked to complete some measure relating to their own views of their body image (e.g., Hall *et al.*, 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick and Crane, 2012). In an example of another popular design, Laborde, Brüll, Weber and Anders (2011) had sportsmen

listen to the sound of a crowd hissing and to a recording containing negative imagery 'which contained propositions aimed at decreasing self-esteem and self-confidence in a sport context' (p. 25).

There is an obligation for investigators not only to debrief but also to attempt to remove even long-term negative effects of psychological research procedures. Forty of Milgram's participants were examined, 1 year after the experiment, by a psychiatrist who reported that no participant had been harmed psychologically by their experience. The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct urges investigators to inform participants of procedures for contacting them should stress or other harm occur after participation.

It is of course impossible to predict when an individual participant might react to a stimulus that uniquely causes them distress. A picture of a river might trigger memory of a relative drowning, for instance. To guard against all such possibilities would render most research impossible. However, the BPS code asks researchers to exercise sensitivity and caution, especially where possible distress is predictable.

Physical discomfort

Psychological experiments and investigations still very commonly involve the use of mild but 'unpleasant' electric shocks (e.g., Zeidan *et al.*, 2012; Åsli and Flaten, 2012; Inagaki and Eisenberger, 2012). Other manipulated variables producing unpleasant experiences are extreme noise (e.g., Becker and Pashler, 2005), food deprivation (e.g., Forzano *et al.*, 2010; Pollatos *et al.*, 2012) and sleep deprivation (e.g., Tempesta *et al.*, 2012; Gazes *et al.*, 2012). In these and all other cases where physical discomfort is knowingly created by researchers it is expected that they will carry out a thoroughgoing risk assessment and that all possible steps will be taken to minimise potential risk or harm. In any research where discomfort might be expected the investigator is expected to seek opinion and advice from professional colleagues before going ahead. Don't forget that of course the research proposal will also have to be vetted by the research institution's ethics committee.

The right to withdraw or not participate; the need for consent

In all research that involves individual participation the investigator is obliged to:

- give the participant full information as to the likely level of discomfort, and to emphasise the voluntary nature of the exercise and the right to withdraw at any time;
- remind the participant of this right to withdraw at any point in the procedure where discomfort appears to be higher than anticipated;
- terminate the procedure where discomfort levels are substantially higher than anticipated and/or the participant is obviously disturbed to an unacceptable level.

Now we can see one of the most controversial aspects of Milgram's study. He was actually testing the power of the experimenter over the participant. His experimenter flagrantly contravened all four principles. The duty to respect the participant's right to withdraw and to remind the

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participant of this right are both now stressed by the APA and BPS. It is also usual to permit the participant to have their data withdrawn from the study up to a certain time after participation specified by the researcher in the debriefing information.

Contrary to the spirit of consent, in Milgram's study, and in a perhaps less human rights conscious era, each participant wishing to stop was commanded to continue in the interests of the research programme. Continuance was 'absolutely essential' and the participant had 'no choice but to go on'. The APA and BPS now also stress special vigilance when the investigator is in a position of power over the participant. This was, of course, the very position forcefully exploited and examined in the Milgram study.

It is usual to obtain the INFORMED CONSENT of research participants. As we shall see below, this isn't always possible before the research is conducted, though for laboratory experiments consent, not necessarily fully informed, can always be obtained. There are many studies where telling participants about all levels of the independent variable would render the research pointless. In a study of stereotyping for instance, for social desirability reasons it would not be much use telling participants in one condition 'You will be judging the abilities of a female football referee but for other participants here the referee will be male.' In research with children, the informed consent of parents or guardians must first be obtained. For obvious reasons, children cannot be subject to great stress, even in the unlikely instance that parents agree (though Little Albert's mother did). Two factors working against informed consent are the investigator's need to deceive on some occasions, and the significant power attaching to the investigator role.

The special power of the investigator

In general, then, the investigator is obliged to give the participant every chance not to participate, both before, during and after the experimental procedure. Working against this, as we have just said, is the position of influence, prestige and power of the investigator. Torbert says: 'the unilaterally controlled research context is itself only one particular kind of social context and a politically authoritarian context at that. It should not be surprising that some of its most spectacularly well-conceived findings concern persons' responses to authoritarianism.' (1981: 144)

An additional dimension to this power emerges when we consider the common position of US psychology undergraduates, who often face obligatory participation in a research project, though they may choose which one. Usually an exemption is offered but it costs one additional term paper, making the choice more apparent than real. Similar conditions now apply in many UK university psychology departments.

A further issue for ethical concern has been the practice of obtaining prison inmates or psychiatric patients for stressful experimental studies, where inducements, such as a pack of cigarettes or temporary release from daily routines, are minimal and would not normally 'buy' participation outside the institution. The Code of Ethics and Conduct places particular emphasis on the way in which consent is obtained from detained persons, and also on the special circumstances of children and adults with impairments in understanding or communication.

Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy

We turn to researchers' treatment of, and guarantees to, participants. Apart from any ethical considerations, there is a purely pragmatic argument for guaranteeing ANONYMITY for participants at all times. If psychologists kept publishing identities along with results, students and the general public would soon cease to volunteer for, or agree to, research participation.

An investigator can promise anonymity by guaranteeing that a participant's identity will never be revealed when data are published. This has to be carefully thought through where details of the person, even though they are not named, make it obvious who they are (e.g., in an applied project with a small company). Investigators can also request permission to identify individuals. Such identification may occur through the use of visual media, as in Milgram's (1965) film *Obedience to Authority*. Research participants who have been seriously deceived (and in fact any others) have the right to witness destruction of any such records they do not wish to be kept. If records are kept, participants have the right to assume these will be safeguarded and used as anonymous data only by thoroughly briefed research staff.

We need to distinguish here between anonymity and CONFIDENTIALITY. If results (e.g., of interviews) are published then they are not confidential, but they can certainly remain anonymous. In fact, keeping data confidential would not be much use to the cause of research. Data need to be accessible to other researchers. Confidentiality, then, is more a feature of psychological practice (keeping clients' data confidential) than it is of research and publication. Anonymity, however, on an ethical basis, should be offered to all participants as a matter of course. Offering anonymity will not necessarily, contrary to many psychologists' belief, improve the quality of what participants report. There is evidence that, although participants may admit to more socially disapproved behaviour under anonymity they are also likely to be less accurate – presumably reasoning that if they can't be identified it doesn't really matter (Lelkes *et al.*, 2012).

There are very special circumstances where an investigator might contravene the anonymity rule, and these are where there are clear dangers to human life. A psychiatric patient's plan to kill himself or a room-mate would be reported. An investigator conducting participant observation into gang life would have a clear obligation to break confidence where a serious crime was about to be committed. The ethical principles involved here are broader than those involved in conducting scientific research. However, Pearson (2009) conducted covert participant observation among football gangs and, in order to maintain credibility with the gang and not to blow his cover, admitted committing several minor crimes (pitch invasion, drinking alcohol on trains where this was prohibited and even threatening behaviour). He argued that the interests of research rose above the mildly negative effects of his behaviour and that he avoided any serious crimes, or having to drop out of the gang, by only committing the minor ones. He claims his own personal beliefs forbade him from taking part in any racial taunting. He also needed to beware of bringing any disrepute to his academic institution.

The participant obviously has the RIGHT TO PRIVACY, and procedures should not be planned that directly invade this without warning. Where a procedure is potentially intimate, embarrassing or sensitive, the participant should be clearly reminded of the right to withhold information or

participation. Particular care would be required, for instance, where participants are being asked about sexual attitudes or behaviour.

The privacy principle is difficult to follow in the case of covert participant observation, and serious criticism has been levelled at users of this approach on these grounds (see the example of Humphreys (1970) below). In such cases it is also difficult to check out the final version of reports with participants in order to verify that an accurate account of their statements has been made.

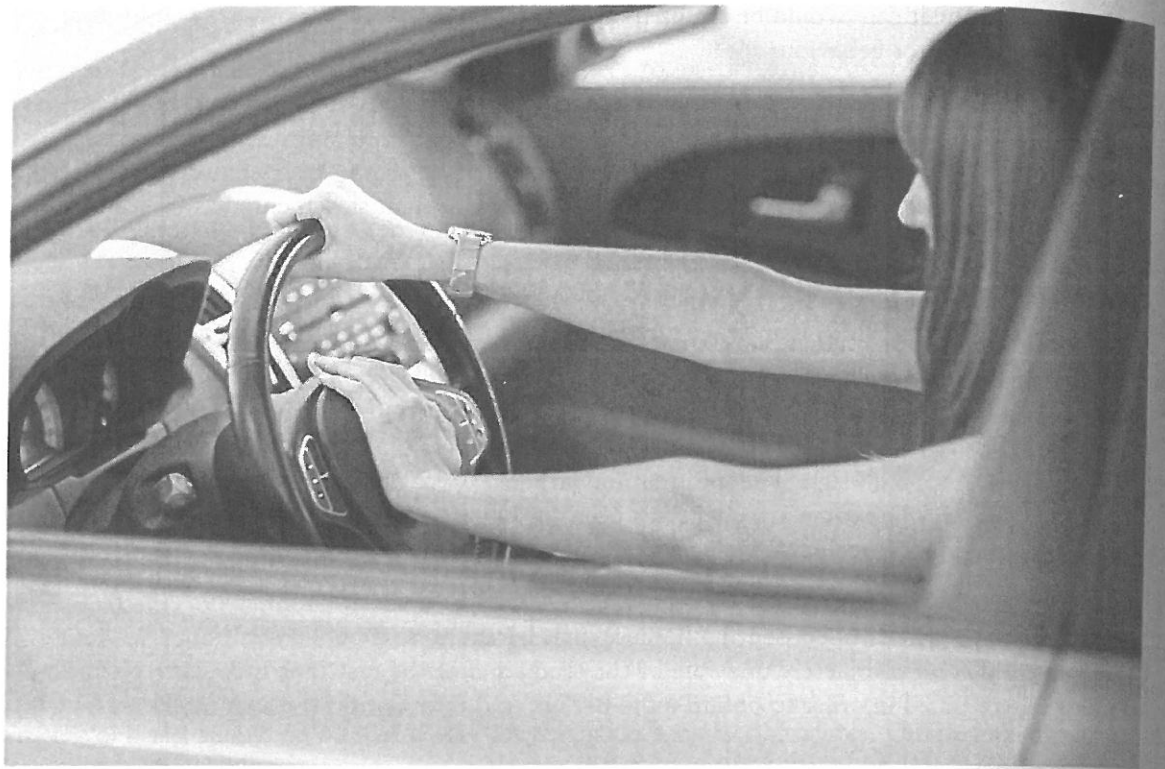
Involuntary participation

In participant observation studies, and in naturalistic (covert) observation, the persons observed are quite often unaware of their participation. This seems fairly unobjectionable where completely unobtrusive observation is made and each person observed is just one in a frequency count. An example would be when cars are observed in order to determine whether more older or younger drivers stop at a 'stop' road sign. The information gathered was available to any ordinary member of the public anyway. The same argument has been forwarded to justify carrying out research involving the use of data freely available on the internet (Kraut *et al.*, 2004).

In covert participant observation, people's private lives may be invaded. Humphreys (1970) investigated the behaviour of consenting homosexuals by acting as a public washroom 'lookout'. Persons observed were completely unaware of the study and of the fact that their car registration numbers were recorded in order to obtain more background information through interviews later on.

Some field studies carried out in the public arena involve manipulations that interfere with people's lives. A street survey obviously delays each respondent, but here consent is always sought first. In contrast, in Piliavin, Rodin and Piliavin's (1969) studies on bystander intervention, a person who appeared either lame or drunk 'collapsed' in a subway train. Predictably, the 'lame' person got more help than the drunk. In another version the actor bit a capsule, which produced a blood-like trickle on his chin. The 'blood' condition also had a lowering effect on helping. Piliavin *et al.*'s study, in fact, contravenes the principles of openness (no deception), stress avoidance and informed consent before participation.

Some field studies involve only a trivial effect on unwitting participants. Doob and Gross (1968) delayed drivers at a traffic light in either a very smart, new car or an older, lower-status one. Effects were predictable in that it took drivers longer to hoot at the smarter car! If these results are fairly unsurprising, couldn't willing participants simply be asked to imagine the situation and consider their likely response? Doob and Gross used a questionnaire as well, and found no difference between the times predicted by independent samples of students for hooting at either car. The 'as if' findings were so different from actual behaviour that the defenders of field research seemed vindicated in their claim to more realistic data. However, by 1991, a computer simulation had been devised, and this produced results consistent with the original findings. The simulation would seem to avoid the need to intervene in real driving behaviour. Nevertheless, in 2006 McGarva, Ramsey and Shear frustrated real drivers on the road by stopping on a green light and in one condition by also using a handheld mobile phone. Not surprisingly, following drivers in the



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latter condition showed more anger, males by hooting more and females by exhibiting angry expressions as judged by video footage taken from the experimenter's car. In 2000 also McGarva and Steiner had participants drive a car and be honked at from behind at a stop sign by a confederate in either a high- or low-status car. Again, participant drivers in the low-status condition reacted more aggressively by accelerating faster but at least here there was virtually no interaction with the public.

Intervention

Some aspects of brief intervention with naïve participants have been dealt with above. Several studies have involved intervention on a substantial scale but with willing participation. For instance, psychologists have worked with parents and children in the home in an effort to demonstrate the beneficial effects of parental stimulation on the child's learning and intellectual performance. In these studies a control group is necessary for baseline comparison. In hospital experiments with new drugs, trials are halted if success is apparent, on the grounds that it would be unethical to withhold the new drug as treatment from the placebo and control groups. Unfortunately, in psychological intervention research, even if success is apparent, there would not

Ethical issues in psychological research

usually be the political power and resources to implement the 'treatment' across all disadvantaged families, for instance. Ethical issues arise, therefore, in selecting one group for special treatment.

Where intervention occurs for research purposes only, and involves the production of behaviour usually considered socially unacceptable, ethical principles need very careful consideration. Leyens, Camino, Parke and Berkowitz (1975), for instance, raised levels of aggression in boys shown a series of violent films. They were observed to be more aggressive in daily activities compared with a control group shown non-violent films. It is quite difficult to see how debriefing alone could leave the boys just where they were before the study began.

Monitoring the appropriate development of behaviour in a long-term study can be achieved by regularly reviewing the responses of participants to the intervention being used. Wood *et al.* (2011) conducted research involving groups of 9–10-year-old schoolchildren who had never before owned a mobile phone and who were given a mobile phone each on which to send text messages over a ten-week period. Earlier research (e.g., Plester, Wood and Joshi, 2009) had shown that those using a higher level of text message abbreviations also had higher literacy abilities. In Wood *et al.*'s study all children were tested each week for reading and spelling ability. This was because, although the mobile phone using group were expected to improve, it was ethically necessary to check that the phones were not having an adverse effect on their literary skills, in which case the study would have been halted. As it turned out the two groups did not differ after ten weeks but within the phone using group there were positive correlations between amount of text use and literacy improvement. This demonstrated at least that the common sense assumption of parents and teachers that text language is bound to create poor spellers is incorrect and that there probably are benefits. As a further ethical consideration, the phone group children were also told that their texts would be monitored for inappropriate use such as insults or threats, which could be viewed as bullying. In this way useful and relevant research could progress without incurring any harm or disadvantage to the participants.

Research with animals

There is nothing more certain of producing a lively debate among psychology students than the discussion of whether or not it is necessary or useful to experiment on defenceless animals. Many students are far more emotionally outraged about animal research than about some of the more questionable human studies, on the grounds that humans can refuse, whereas animals have no such chance.

One cannot deceive animals, though one can fool them. Nor can they give their informed consent, be debriefed or ask for a procedure to be terminated. Animals *can*, however, be subject to exploitation, extreme levels of physical pain and mental stress, though only the most callously inhumane experimenter could ignore severe suffering.

I don't intend to go through the innumerable examples of animals in pitiful situations in the psychological research laboratory. To list the kinds of situation is enough:

- severe sensory deprivation,
- severe to complete social deprivation,

Whatever the rationale for animal studies, or the fierce, impassioned objections, it seems likely they will continue as an adjunct to psychological research, though perhaps not at their earlier intensity. British research is carried out under the *Guidelines for Psychologists Working with Animals* issued by the BPS (2012)⁹ to which the reader is referred in the Code of Ethics and Practice. In these, the following points are made:

- Knowledge to be gained must justify procedure; trivial research is not encouraged, alternative methods are.
- The smallest possible number of animals should be used.
- No members of endangered species should ever be used.
- Caging, food deprivation, procedures causing discomfort or pain should all be assessed relative to the particular species studied. A procedure relatively mild to one can be damaging to another.
- Naturalistic studies are preferred to laboratory ones, but animals should be disturbed as little as possible in the wild.
- Experimenters must be familiar with the technical aspects of anaesthesia, pharmacological compounds and so on; regular post-operative medical checks must be made.

The guidelines also direct the psychologist to the relevant laws under which animal research is conducted and to the need for various licences.

Conclusions

All in all, it looks difficult to conduct much research at all without running into ethical arguments. Certainly it seems impossible to proceed with anything before considering many possible ethical objections, but this is as it should be. Other sciences, too, have their associations and committees for considering social responsibility in scientific research. They argue about the use to which findings might be put or the organisations from which it would not be prudent to accept sponsorship. They consider the likely impact of their work on society as a whole. Similarly, psychology has to make these considerations. However, since humans, as individuals in society, are also the focal point of research, it is hardly surprising that psychology, as a research society, has to be particularly vigilant in spotting malpractice, abuse, thoughtlessness, charlatanism and lack of professionalism. If psychologists prefer not to have people take one step backwards at parties and say things like 'I bet you're testing me' or 'Is this part of an experiment?', they need to reassure the public constantly that some excesses of the past cannot now happen, and that deception really is only used when necessary.

The humanists and qualitative researchers appear to have gained the moral high ground on these ethical issues, not just because they put dignity, honesty and humanity first, but because they see their participative or non-directive methods as the only route to genuine, un-coerced information

⁹ Available at: www.bps.org.uk/system/files/images/guideline_for_psychologists_working_with_animals_2012_rep55_2012_web.pdf

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