

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH ETHICS

Research Skills for Mental Health
Session 2

RESEARCH ETHICS.... WHY??



British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics

The moral principles by which we conduct ourselves as psychological researchers

https://www1.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/inf180_web.pdf

■ As researchers we have a moral obligation...

- To our participants
- To the academic/professional field
- To our employers/funding body
- To ourselves

■ Students and professionals alike have this obligation

Why do we need ethics?

- Ensure no undue harm is caused to participants
- Counteract power issues
- Protect ourselves as researchers
- Demonstrate awareness of appreciation and importance of ethical standards in research
 - Should be part of learning outcomes in student research

THE MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

Four ethical principles (BPS, 2014)

1. RESPECT

Recognising the importance of your participants.

Three characteristics:

- **Autonomy**
 - Peoples ability to make their own choices
 - Informed consent – plus acting on their wishes
- **Privacy**
 - Participants right to withdraw or not participate
 - Respect privacy by concealing identity (anon/confidential)
- **Dignity**
 - People have a right to be treated as an individual
 - Full debriefing

2. INTEGRITY

Honesty and accuracy in how research is conducted and published.

Can involve:

- **Transparency**
 - Honest research – lack of deception
- **Professionalism**
 - Avoiding personal relationships with participants
 - Not allowing personal opinions to influence research
- **Collegiality**
 - Monitor and guide other researchers
 - Respect others work, even if we disagree with it

3. RESPONSIBILITY

Ensuring research leads to 'good' outcomes for all that are involved.

Recognising that research may carry on having effects long after all data has been collected

- **We are in positions of trust**
 - *Must not abuse this*
- **Professional competence**
 - *Researchers can have a lot of influence over participants.*
 - *Only provide advice/guidance they are qualified to pass on*
 - *Particularly important for researchers studying mental illness*

4. BENEFIT AND HARM

Cost-benefit analysis.

Research should proceed if the benefits outweigh ANY harm caused

- **Aim for no harm**
 - *Generally, the risk of harm should not be greater than could be encountered in ordinary life*
- **Temporary distress/discomfort?**
 - *What if the research is highly significant?*

Risk in Research

"Risks attend us every moment in life, and to say that research should involve no risks would be inappropriate" (BPS).

BUT

Research ethics form should convince the ethics committee that the researcher:

- *Is aware of the potential harms/consequences*
- *Has ensured the participants know their rights as participants*
- *Has put steps in place to minimise such harms occurring (with follow-up procedures if necessary)*
- *Demonstrates a commitment to relevant ethical and professional standards*

Key ethical considerations in any project

- Written **informed** consent – at appropriate levels
- Clarity and comprehension of research materials
 - *Appropriate for target audience?*
- No potential coercion
- Right to withdraw
- Debriefing
- Potential for harm/discomfort/distress
- Confidentiality/Data Protection

“There are no ethical issues with this research”

Online research

- <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research%20%282017%29.pdf>

Completing ethics applications

What we expect to see:

- Clear brief lay summary of project
- Detailed explanation of recruitment and data collection processes
- Explanation/justification of consent processes
- Acknowledgement of potential ethical issues and how these have been specifically addressed for the project
- Justification for any sensitive research

Informed Consent

- Giving the participant a reasonable idea of what will be expected of them
 - *Filling in questionnaires about attitudes and beliefs*
 - *Being observed for research purposes*
 - *Viewing images on a computer screen*
- It may be necessary to withhold certain information
 - *If it would inform the participant what the study is about and influence their responses*
 - *If there is no other way to carry out the study*
- In that case, a full explanation of the nature of the study must be supplied in a debrief at the end of the study

Informed Consent

- Participants must give fully informed consent to take part in any research.
 - The purpose of the research
 - Any procedures involved
 - Any foreseeable risks of discomfort
 - Benefits of the research
 - Length of time
 - Rights of the participant (confidentiality, withdraw, etc)
 - Details of the researcher

Deception

- Where participants are misled or wrongly informed about the aims of the research
- Sometimes necessary in order to avoid demand characteristics
- Participants must be deceived as little as possible; however, if deception is necessary, the true nature must always be revealed in the debrief with the opportunity to withdraw data

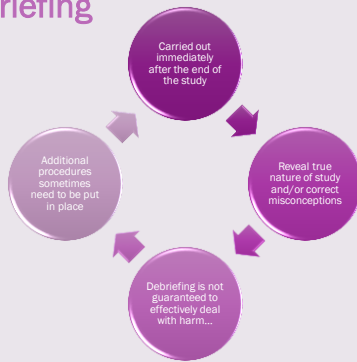
Right to Withdraw

- Acts as a failsafe for informed consent
 - *The right to withdraw at any time, without fear of penalty*
- Following deception - can also choose to withdraw their data immediately following study participation if they are uncomfortable following the debrief

Debriefing

- Full disclosure of the nature of the study
- Following the research, especially where any deception or withholding of information had taken place, the importance of appropriate debriefing is key
- In some circumstances, **the verbal description of the nature of the investigation may not be sufficient to eliminate all possibility of harmful after-effects.**
- For example, **a study in which negative mood was induced requires the induction of a happy mood state before the participant leaves the study setting.**

Debriefing



Anonymity / Confidentiality

- Is your data:
 - a) confidential?
 - b) anonymous?

Confidential:

- ❖ How will you ensure any hard copies or electronic data is stored confidentially?
- ❖ Locked filing cabinets, password-protected files, etc

Anonymous:

- ❖ Any identifiable information from questionnaires, transcripts, etc should be removed – replaced with a unique ID number.
- ❖ Consent forms should be stored separately from main data
- ❖ Qualitative data must use pseudonyms or ID numbers in place of real names

Consent for children

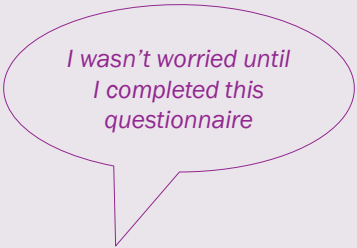
- You need to be very careful if using children under the age of 18 for your research.
 - Parental consent
 - Other consent e.g., School?
- Children aged 16 upwards sometimes judged competent to give consent themselves
- Specific guidelines depending on professional body/type of research

For consent to be considered both legal and ethical it must be:

- Given by a person with capacity;
- Voluntarily given, with no undue influence;
- Given by someone who has been adequately informed;
- A fair choice.
- Consent V Assent

- The Mental Capacity Act states that research with individuals (adults) who lack the capacity to consent must have the ethics of the research scrutinised and approved by an 'appropriate body'.
- Researchers should assume that a person has capacity, unless there is proof that they do not have capacity to make a specific decision
- Potential participants must receive support to try to help the make their own decision.
- Judge each case individually, do not assume that a participant does not have capacity because of an impairing condition

Potential for discomfort, distress and anxiety



- Does your research have any potential for making people more anxious, worried or distressed?
- If so, what efforts are you making to minimise this risk?
- What will you do if someone does report distress as a result of taking part in your research?



A collage of purple speech bubbles containing quotes from participants, overlaid on a background image of a baby. The quotes are:

- "I felt that I couldn't say no"
- "I wasn't worried until I completed your questionnaire"
- "Now I feel stupid"
- "I wouldn't have wanted my child to have done that"
- "I didn't really understand what I was being asked to do"
- "I didn't know it would be recorded"
- "I don't want my words used in your research"
