## Dr Henk Swanepoel on Twitter: "Working in the field of forensic ...Description: http://clc2.uniservity.com/GroupDownloadAttachment.asp?GroupId=78790&AttachmentID=1074283Step up to 6th Form

## Get ahead in Psychology –

## Considering the implications of Psychological research

## Student Activity

# Ethical issues in Psychological research

**Definition:** Ethics can be defined as the science of morals or rules of behaviour.

**What do we mean by Ethics in Psychology?**

The British Psychological Society (BPS) issues ethical guidelines for those involved in conducting psychological research. These outline what is considered to be acceptable and unacceptable Below is an outline of the four principles and the main ethical guidelines you need to know:

### 1. Respect

Psychologists should respect individual, cultural and role differences, including (but not exclusively) those involving age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, marital or family status and socio-economic status. They should also respect the knowledge, insight, experience and expertise of participants and members of the general public .and avoid practices that are unfair or prejudiced. The guidelines informed consent, right to withdraw and privacy and confidentiality are part of the principle of respect.

### 2. 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. .

### 3. Responsibility

Psychologists value their responsibilities 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. The guidelines protection of participants and debriefing are part of the principle responsibility.

### 4. 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. The guidelines relating to deception are part of the integrity principle.

### The main ethical guidelines

**Informed Consent** – Participants should be told the nature, purpose, and anticipated consequences of any research participation, and ideally the researcher should gain informed consent at the beginning of research. If participants are under the age of 16, consent needs to be gained from parents or guardians.

**Right to withdraw** – Investigators should make clear to participants their right to withdraw from the investigation at any time irrespective of payment or other inducement. If a participant withdraws they have the right to demand their own data and recordings to be destroyed.

**Privacy and Confidentiality** – Participants privacy should be respected and in the case of observations research you should only expect to be observed in a ‘public place’. All results or information gathered relating to specific individuals must be kept confidential. Names or details of participants should not be released. Participants should be made aware where any breech of confidentially may occur.

**Protection of Participants** – Researchers must not cause any physical or psychological harm to participants. They should leave a study in the same state that they entered.

**Deception** – Intentional deception such as lying to participants, misleading them about the aims or other aspects involved must be avoided as much as possible unless deception is necessary in exceptional circumstances to preserve the integrity of research.

**Debriefing** – **A way to overcome breaking ethical guidelines** after a piece of unethical research has been conducted is to debrief your participants. This is done at the end of the study, it is the researchers’ responsibility to provide participants with any necessary information they need to complete their understanding of the study and check that participants have not suffered any harm psychological or physical harm. If the participants had been deceived in any way or consent not gained the researchers should fully explain the true purpose.

For more information regarding the ethical guidelines refer to the BPs website code of ethics.

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-ethics-and-conduct>

### Why is it important to adhere to ethical guidelines?

To ensure that all participants are protected from harm. This will give psychology a good name and should mean that participants will be willing to take part again in any future research. This is very important because participants are vital for psychological research. Any psychological harm suffered by participants would give psychology a bad name and would deter further participation in research.

### The cost benefit analysis

Psychologists must ‘weigh up’ the benefits to society that may be gained by testing new theories and the costs to the participants within the research. This may often produce conflict about treating the participants ethically. For example, if informed consent is obtained and no deception is used in the study the participants are being treated ethically BUT they are not naïve so this could affect the results of the study.

**Can you think of any other reasons why psychologists may break ethical guidelines and what benefits it may have for their research?**

### Task 1 – Checking your understanding of ethics

Using your knowledge of the above guidelines assess the following studies in relation to the ethical issues presented within them. State and explain how the issues were broken or followed.

**Task 1a – David Reimer**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLFGMWoQaCU>

In 1965, a baby boy was born in Canada named David Reimer. At eight months old, he was brought in for a standard procedure: circumcision. Unfortunately, during the process his penis was burned off. This was due to the physicians using an electro cautery needle instead of a standard scalpel.

When the parents visited psychologist John Money, he suggested a simple solution to a very complicated problem: a sex change. His parents were distraught about the situation, but they eventually agreed to the procedure. They didn’t know that the doctor’s true intentions were to prove that nurture, not nature, determined gender identity. Therefore, he decided to use David as his own private case study.

David, now Brenda, acted very much like a stereotypical boy and had conflicting and confusing feelings about an array of topics. Worst of all, her parents did not inform her of the horrific accident as an infant. This caused devastating consequences through the family. Brenda’s mother was suicidal, her father was alcoholic, and her brother was severely depressed.

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| **Outline one of the ethical issues broken or followed.** |

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| **Consider the cost to the participants and the benefits of the findings. Was this research justified?** |

**Task 1b – Stanley Milgram (1963)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr5cjyokVUs>

Stanley Milgram was interested in investigating whether ordinary people will obey a legitimate authority figure even when required to injure an innocent person. Participants were 40 males aged 20-50 from New Haven in the USA and had volunteered to take part in a study about learning and memory. They were paid $4.50 for their participation and told they would still get paid simply for turning up at the lab. There was also a ‘confederate’ who played the role of the learner whom participants believed to be a real participant. Participants were allocated a role of a teacher or learner (which was fixed and they were always given the role of the teacher) and took part in a word pair recall task.

The confederate was always given the role of the ‘learner’ in each trial and always acted exactly the same for each participant. The participant was always allocated the ‘teacher’ role. The teacher was told to administer an electric shock to the learner every time he got a question wrong on the tasks (the electric shock was fake but participants didn’t know this!). The learner mainly gave wrong answers and he received his fake shocks after each wrong answer was given. Even when the learner seemed in apparent pain (always banging on a wall at 300 Volts) the experimenter told the participant (teacher) to continue.

In total 65% of participants continued to deliver a deadly 450 volt shock, all participants went to 300 volts. Milgram conducted his research in other countries and found a similar level of obedience in those too. Participants were debriefed at the end of the study and reunited with the confederate.

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| **Outline one of the ethical issues broken or followed.** |

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| **Consider the cost to the participants and the benefits of the findings. Was this research justified?** |

**Task 1c – Watson & Rayner (1920) Little Albert**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO1nFvNlhGc&t=38s>

Watson & Rayner were interested in whether humans can be conditioned (learn) to fear objects or situations. They suggested that all our behaviour is learnt after we are born and are influenced by external environmental factors. They wanted to find out the following:

1. Can an infant be conditioned to fear an animal that appears simultaneously with a loud, fear-arousing sound?

2. Would such fear transfer to other animals or to inanimate objects?

3. How long would such fears persist?

Watson and Rayner presented Little Albert (a 9-month-old infant) with a white rat and he showed no fear. Watson then presented the rat with a loud bang that startled Little Albert and made him cry. After the continuous association of the white rat and loud noise Little Albert was classically conditioned to experience fear at the sight of the rat. Albert's fear generalized to other stimuli that were similar to the rat, including a fur coat, some cotton wool and a Father Christmas mask.

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