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# 2

## ETHICS FOR RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY

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### Objectives

On reading this chapter you should:

- be aware of the major functions of ethics codes, and why they play such a crucial role in psychological research;
- be familiar with the four common overarching principles, which the major standards are based around;
- understand the interdependence of ethics and the research process;
- be able to make the necessary ethical decisions involved in the planning of your research project, in the status and welfare of your participants, and in the interpretation of your data; and
- also be aware of the noteworthy issues involved in ethics for qualitative research.

### Overview

*Chapter 2 deals with the crucial issue of ethical consideration for research in psychology, and more specifically for you, the undergraduate psychology student, about to embark on your first piece of independent research. It is important to realise that one of the major judgement errors made by undergraduate psychology students, is that they fail to realise the importance and relevance of ethical principles to their research project. The vital role played by ethics in the planning, execution and reporting of quantitative and qualitative research cannot be overstated. Instead of seeing psychological science and ethics as separate, a superior understanding recognises their essential interdependence. As will become apparent, ethical issues must be addressed at all stages of the research process. The topic of ethics is therefore presented in this section (Setting Yourself up for Success) to highlight its importance.*

*Two major purposes for codes of ethics have been cited in the literature (Pettifor, 2004). Codes of ethics promote best practice by providing aspirational principles that encourage reflection and decision-making within a moral framework,*

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and also act to regulate professional behaviour, through monitoring and through disciplinary action against those who violate prescriptive and enforceable standards of conduct (Sinclair 1987; Lindsay, 1996; Pettifor, 1996; Fisher, 2003; Pack-Brown and Williams, 2003). It is crucial that you are aware that the goal of ethics is to encourage ethical thinking (Pack-Brown, 2003) for your research project as opposed to mere rule-following. Rules tend to proliferate as a function of the virtual impossibility of covering every conceivable situation (Stark, 1998) that the undergraduate psychology researcher may encounter. Furthermore, lists of rules often encourage an unthinking cookbook approach to ethical conduct that can lead to misapplication of the rules (Stark, 1998). Ethics, therefore, lend moral structure to your decision-making throughout the research project: from the planning of your study, your treatment of participants, to the interpretation of your results.

Section 2.1 highlights the codes of ethics laid down by a number of professional bodies. The Draft Universal Declaration (2005) and the Meta-Code of the EFPA (1995) provide a shared moral framework, organising ethical standards around four overarching principles, which is shown to act as a very useful template for professional organisations to adapt their code around.

Section 2.2 then considers ethical issues in planning your study, in the status and welfare of participants, and in the interpretation of research. It is also important to note, that although these guidelines exist and are actively enforced by each organisation, there is no national or international legislation to enforce them. It is therefore up to individual universities and colleges to enforce these ethical principles, which is usually done in the form of ethic review committees or boards, and it is up to you, the psychology student, to uphold them. Finally Section 2.3 pays special attention to some ethical issues arising from qualitative research.

## 2.1 Shared Moral Framework

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Clearly, ethics is the study of good and bad, and of the general nature of morals in different societies (Sartorius, 1999, p. 3). Pendersen (1995) proposed universalism of ethics codes, universal values based on common humanity, respect for the diversity of beliefs, and standards based on differences in culture, religion and political systems. Similarly Gauthier (2003) proposes that psychologists have the right to useful ethical guidance for their professional and research behaviour, and that all individuals have the right to effective protection from the misuse of psychology. This coincides with the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) who, in 2002, mandated a working group to prepare a Draft Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (Pettifor, 2004), which was presented in June 2005. This pragmatic scheme involved the IUPsyS, the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP) and also the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP).

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The Draft Universal Declaration (2005) describes ethical principles and values for the international psychology community. It provides a shared moral framework, organising all ethical standards around four overarching principles, which are clearly the embodiment of guidelines based on values and principles, within what is technically a code. The Meta-Code of the EFPA (1995) is based around four similar principles, developed to act as a very useful template for other organisations to adapt their code around. Many professional bodies have structured their code of ethics around these templates, as illustrated in Table 2.1: the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (CPA, 2000), the Code of Ethics: For Psychologists Working in Aotearoa/New Zealand (New Zealand Psychological Society, 2002), the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2002), and Code of Professional Ethics (PSI, 2003). The British Psychological Society is currently revising, The Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants (BPS, 1978; q.v.), which share many similarities with the common codes.

## **2.2 Ethical Considerations in Psychological Research**

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It is important to understand the interdependence of ethics and the research process. Ethical considerations during the research process can be categorised into three major areas as seen in Figure 2.1.

### **Planning the study**

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When planning a research project, the codes of ethics mentioned above deal with the researcher's basic problem of balancing the need to discover new principles of behaviour with the need to protect participants. Research ethics can no longer be viewed as a set of rules to be applied, but rather as a way of reasoning about constructing a relationship with participants (York University Task Force on Ethical Issues in Research, 1992).

There are a number of things for you, the undergraduate psychology student, to consider before embarking on your research project. In planning your study it is vital to consider its ethical acceptability under the relevant ethics codes. If an ethical issue is unclear, it is important to resolve the issue with your supervisor, or your institutions ethics review board. The important role of the research proposal is highlighted. As will be drawn out in the following chapter, the process of writing the proposal will aid you in making intelligent and ethical research decisions, and also in flagging any potential ethical concerns for your supervisor.

You should ask yourself about the worthiness of your proposed project, and whether it will contribute to psychology in some meaningful way. It is appreciated that poor science is unethical. Rosenthal (1994) proposes considering

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**Table 2.1 Combination of Major Codes of Ethics**

<b>Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (2005)</b>	
Principle I	Respect for the Dignity of All Human Beings
Principle II	Competent Caring for the Well-Being of Others
Principle III	Integrity
Principle IV	Professional and Scientific Responsibilities to Society
<b>European Federation of Psychologists Association (EFPA) Meta-Code of Ethics (1995)</b>	
Principle 2.1	Respect for a Person's Rights and Dignity
Principle 2.2	Competence
Principle 2.3	Responsibility
Principle 2.4	Integrity
<b>Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists 3rd ed. (2002)</b>	
Principle I	Respect for the Dignity of Persons
Principle II	Responsible Caring
Principle III	Integrity in Relationships
Principle IV	Responsibility to Society
<b>Code of Ethics: For Psychologists Working in Aotearoa/New Zealand (2002)</b>	
Principle 1	Respect for the Dignity of Persons and Peoples
Principle 2	Responsible Caring
Principle 3	Integrity in Relationships
Principle 4	Social Justice and Responsibility to Society
<b>Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2002)</b>	
Principle A	Beneficence and Non-maleficence
Principle B	Fidelity and Responsibility
Principle C	Integrity
Principle D	Justice
Principle E	Respect for People's Rights and Dignity
<b>Code of Professional Ethics (PSI, 2003)</b>	
Principle 1	Respect for the Rights and Dignity of the Person
Principle 2	Competence
Principle 3	Responsibility
Principle 4	Integrity
<b>Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants (BPS, 1978; q.v.)</b>	
Principle 1	Introduction
Principle 2	General
Principle 3	Consent
Principle 4	Deception
Principle 5	Debriefing
Principle 6	Withdrawal from the investigation
Principle 7	Confidentiality
Principle 8	Protection of Participants
Principle 9	Observational Research
Principle 10	Giving Advice

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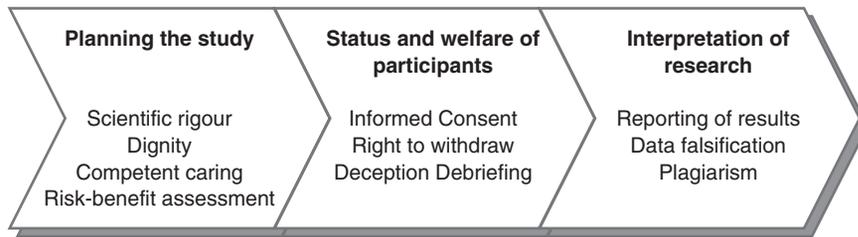


Figure 2.1 Three major stages for ethical considerations

the quality of research as a factor in ethical decisions, 'everything else being equal, research that is of a higher scientific quality is more ethically defensible' (p. 127). It is unethical to ask people to participate in your study if it has little or no likelihood, because of poor conceptualisation and design, of producing meaningful results or furthering scientific knowledge. Your research project must be planned so that the chance of misleading results is minimised. It is important to realise that if your project has flawed methodology, your results will be of no value and the time of the participants will have been wasted.

Planned steps must always be taken to protect and ensure the dignity and welfare of all your participants. Inadequate attention to respect for person, beneficence and justice, can affect the scientific viability and validity of your research. Part of the planning stage also involves determining the degree of risk to be encountered by participants. Under the principle of competent caring, you are required to demonstrate an active concern for the well-being of your participants. This can be achieved by minimising the invasiveness of your study. Rosnow and Rosenthal (1997) developed a risk-benefit model to assist the researcher. The basic dilemma is to weigh the scientific value of the study being planned against the degree of intrusion on those contributing data.

This model is useful for judging whether your research proposal will be passed or rejected. A study falling at A would not be approved as the risks are high and the benefits are low, whereas a study falling at D would be approved because the risks are low but the benefits are high. Obviously this is the ideal situation for your psychology project. Studies that fall along the B–C axis can be difficult to determine whether they would be approved or not, and you should stay clear of any ideas for your research that fall along this axis. For example, although a study that falls at C has low risk, the benefits of carrying out the piece of research are also low, therefore it is unlikely to yield any benefit and would probably not be approved. A study that falls at B has high benefits but also has high risks. The undergraduate psychology student is advised to avoid these research situations, as you may not have the experience to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits that an experienced researcher can.

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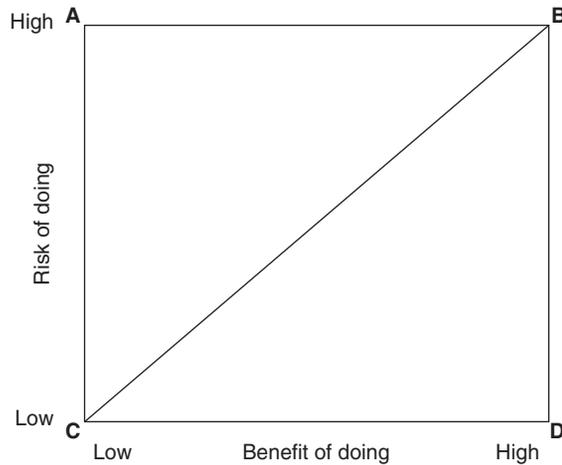


Figure 2.2 Decision-plane model representing the risk-benefit assessment process (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997)

## Status and welfare of participants

### *Informed consent and withdrawal*

It is very important to ensure that all the participants that take part in your study are volunteers. As noted by Jonas (1969), only the authenticity of volunteering overcomes the depersonalising effect of being treated as a token or sample in an experiment. A major ethical consideration concerns the status of your participants, focusing on the issues of informed consent, deception and the right of participants to withdraw from your study at any time. You are required to make it crystal clear to your volunteers that even after they have consented to participate in your study, they can leave the experiment at any time. You are also required to inform your participants of any objectives of your study, which might affect their willingness to participate.

Participants should give informed consent formally, after they have been informed of the nature of your study, and are invited to sign a consent form (see Figure 2.3).

It has been argued that true informed consent is impossible in qualitative research (Eisner, 1991) – the researcher often follows up new and promising leads, which cannot be anticipated in advance. For qualitative research of this nature, it is important that you inform your participants of this trend in the data collection process. At least then they will be aware that this could happen. Your participants may think that you have deceived them if a particular issue comes about, and they weren't informed of it.

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**An Investigation of the Self-Reference Effect**

The purpose of this study to determine how accurately people can remember information related to them. If you participate, you will be required to complete a computerised task involving word lists and questions. The task will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. The exact hypothesis that is being investigated will be explained to you at the conclusion of your participation. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation or about the study, you may contact me at \_\_\_\_\_

I have read the description of the investigation of the Self-Reference Effect, and I voluntarily agree to participate. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty, and that my participation and the record of my performance will be kept strictly confidential.

When the entire investigation has been completed (tick the relevant box)

Would  Would not   
like a brief summary of the overall results.

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2.2 An example of a consent form

Also note that if you plan to use children, i.e. anyone under the age of 18, as your participants it is very important to get not only *their* consent, but also the consent of a parent/guardian. You should also make sure that you are up to speed with guidelines and acts relating to using children in research.

### ***Deception***

During your research you should continually ask yourself about your relationship with the participants; are you telling the truth? Has a climate of trust developed? The principle of integrity promotes the value of truthfulness and accurate communication, therefore, the intentional deception of participants over the purpose and general nature of your project should be avoided whenever possible. Also the experience of deception can cause many adverse effects, which violates the principle of care.

However, there are a number of psychological processes that are modifiable by participants if they knew that these processes were being studied. In such cases the statement of the research hypotheses in advance of consent and collection of the data would confound the research, by affecting the construct validity of the variables under investigation. There is universal recognition within the codes of ethics that a distinction can be made between withholding some of the details of the hypotheses under investigation and deliberately misleading participants of the purpose of the research. In this situation it is imperative that you discuss and get the go ahead from your supervisor.

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***Confidentiality***

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The principle of respect for the dignity of all human beings involves upholding the value of privacy of participants, and the value of confidentiality of the personal information they disclose. Ensuring confidentiality has a potential scientific benefit of improving the internal validity of your study if it leads participants to be more honest and open when responding (Blanck, 1992).

If your study could potentially cause your participants some form of social embarrassment, you should keep their responses anonymous. In this circumstance, it is important to ask participants to refrain from using their names or any other identifying information. It is important that you do not include a space for a signature on the consent form. However, this level of anonymity is not always possible. In such cases, you can keep participants' responses confidential by simply removing any identifying information from their records once you have used them, and replace with a code. If you will need to test participants on more than one occasion, random numbers can be assigned to participants at the beginning of your experimentation.

***Debriefing***

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As the principle of competent caring suggests, you are ethically obligated to seek ways to benefit participants even after your research is completed. An effective way of meeting this standard is to provide the participants of your study with a post-experimental session known as debriefing. It is imperative that you do not view your participants as a means to an end, as mere pawns or objects of which to collect data on or from. You must respect their unique worth and inherent dignity. Remember that once your data has been collected, your responsibility towards your participants does not end there.

Once your project is finished, or when you have analysed and interpreted your results, you should offer your participants a debriefing session. The amount of time spent debriefing depends on the complexity of your study, but generally, a properly conducted debriefing session can take longer than your experimentation. During this session, you should answer any questions your participants have regarding any aspect of your project. It is also important that you are explicit about their role in your study, and explain your research question and the main findings. Smith and Richardson (1983) found that participants who were thoroughly debriefed evaluated the research more positively. The importance of leaving your participants with a good feeling about their participation cannot be over-emphasised. As already mentioned, they have invested their time and energy into your project.

The debriefing process can also be useful for your discussion section, as it helps you learn how participants viewed the procedures in your study. It can

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provide leads for future research and help identify problems in current protocols (Blanck et al., 1992). This point will be dealt with again in later chapters.

**Interpretation of research**

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The ethical principles of integrity and professional and scientific responsibility involve upholding the values of truthfulness, honesty and accuracy. Failure to conduct research in an ethical manner undermines the entire scientific process, impedes the advancement of knowledge and ultimately erodes the public's respect for scientific and academic communities (Shaughnessy, 2003).

**Reporting of results and data falsification**

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You are ethically obligated to be scrupulously accurate in managing your data. The integrity of your data is of pivotal importance to the advancement of the knowledge base for psychology as a science. Science is founded on knowledge derived from investigations, therefore, if the data are false, it creates very negative implications for science. Data falsification can take numerous forms, the most extreme of which is when the researcher fails to collect any data and manufactures it. Another form involves altering or omitting some of the data collected, in order for the results to fit a preconceived biased trend. A final form of data falsification involves guessing or creating missing data, in order to generate a complete data set. In all the cases cited above, each involve deliberate deception, which has already been discussed as violating the ethical principles such as integrity.

**Freedom of information**

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Remember that any information related to an identifiable person constitutes personal data processing. It should comply with data protection principles of fair processing of data and security of data. You should familiarise yourself with the relevant freedom of information acts, for example, the Data Protection Act 1998 includes the European Union, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, while the Safe Harbor Framework is used in the United States and was approved by the EU in 2000.

**Plagiarism**

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It is also your responsibility as a researcher to abide by the principal of intellectual property and to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism refers to the copying or close paraphrasing of someone else's work, and is considered a violation of the principle of integrity. Accusations of plagiarism can ruin your academic career,

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and possibly prevent you from being awarded your psychology degree. Plagiarism can often result from the failure to double-check a source, or from the failure to use quotations when relevant. Failure to acknowledge secondary sources can also result in plagiarism. It is important that you always cite a secondary source as such, it is unethical to report information or points of view in a way that implies that you read the original work. Remember that secondary sources involve an interpretation, which may or may not be correct.

### 2.3 A Note on Ethics in Qualitative Research

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Although the ethical issues addressed in the previous section apply to both quantitative and qualitative processes of inquiry, a special note is made regarding qualitative methods. New emerging qualitative methods of inquiry are presenting a new backdrop of ethical issues, and their use requires reconsideration of how to utilise conventional ethical principles and standards (Haverkamp, 2005). Similar to quantitative research, Morrow (2005) proposes trustworthiness as a core criterion for quality and rigour in qualitative research. As will be discussed later in the text, qualitative research demonstrates an emphasis on the distinctiveness and individuality of human experience rather than on investigating universal theories of human behaviour.

As already noted, researchers are obligated to abide by the principle of respect for the dignity of all human beings, which involves upholding the value of participants' privacy, and the value of confidentiality of the personal information they disclose. However, qualitative research can often involve extensive quotations from participants, which can make it very difficult to disguise participants' identity, constituting a potential violation of research confidentiality (Haverkamp, 2005). In such cases, it is important that participants are aware of this, *prior* to giving their consent to participate.

Another obvious difference between the two types of research is the role played by the participants. In qualitative research, both the researcher and participants are far more engaged in the emergent research process. Participants are often required to disclose information that is potentially emotional, therefore the researcher must uphold the principle of competent caring, by demonstrating an active concern for the well-being of participants.

A final caution is made regarding the interpretation of qualitative data. During the interpretation process, the qualitative researcher has a much broader scope for making sense of the data collected, based on their intuitions, creativity and personal experience. Kvale (1996) refers to this interpretative process as 'personal subjectivity'. Remember that the integrity of data is of pivotal importance to the advancement of the knowledge base for psychology as a science.

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## Summary

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The Draft Universal Declaration (2005) describes ethical principles and values for the international community. When planning your research project, planned steps must be taken to ensure the dignity and welfare of all your participants, while also ensuring that your research is designed to a high level of scientific rigour. It is very important to ensure that all your participants have given their informed consent and are aware of their right to withdraw at any point. The principle of respect for dignity involves upholding the values of confidentiality and privacy. According to the principle of competent caring, you are obligated to debrief your participants. The failure to conduct research in an ethical manner undermines the entire scientific process and impedes the advancement of knowledge, therefore it is imperative that you are scrupulously accurate in managing and reporting your data. You must also avoid plagiarism of any kind, as it is considered a violation of the principle of integrity.

## Further Reading

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