

Aim: To develop students' skills of critical thinking, in particular about ethical issues.

Ask students to read through the following ethical guidelines answer the questions and then fill in the table.

ETHICS

ETHICS are standards of conduct that distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, justices and injustice.

The primary aim of psychology must be to improve the quality of human life and to do this it is necessary to carry out research with human participants. Research psychologists have a duty to respect the rights and dignity of all participants.

This means that they must follow certain **moral principles and rules of conduct**, which are designed to protect both participants and the reputation of psychology. The professional organization that governs psychology in Britain is the **British Psychological Society (BPS)**. They have produced a list of **ethical guidelines** that all practicing psychologists must follow.

An ethical issue is any situation that repeatedly gives rise to an ethical dilemma. For example, whether or not to deceive a research participant in a psychological study in order to gain more worthwhile findings is an ethical issue because it creates an ethical dilemma for the researcher i.e. what should they do? One of the main reasons organizations like the BPS have developed ethical guidelines is that it removes the need for researchers to resolve these dilemmas on their own.

The BPS ethical guidelines

Informed consent

Participants must give their consent to take part in research and this consent must be 'informed'. **This means that information must be made available on which to base a decision to participate or not.** Participants should be told what they are letting themselves in for. Only then are they in a position to give informed consent.

To study participants without consent would be ethically acceptable so long as what happens to the participants could just as likely happen to them in everyday life. E.g. observation in naturalistic setting such as bus queues. People in bus queues may be observed by anyone. In the case of young people under 16, consent should also be obtained from their parents.

A major problem with informed consent is the possibility that the researcher will 'give the game away' and thus influence participants' behavior. As a result, a case can be made for withholding information.

Deception

Deception means that information is withheld from participants; they are misled about the purpose of the study and what will happen during it. According to the BPS guideline *'Intentional deception of the participants should be avoided whenever possible'*. In particular deception is unacceptable if it leads to *'discomfort anger or objections from the participants' when the deception is revealed after the research has been complete'*.

But, the BPS accepts that **sometimes deception is unavoidable**. In such cases the researcher must:

- 1) Make sure that alternative procedures that avoid deception are not available
- 2) Consult with colleagues about how participants might be affected by the deception
- 3) Reveal the deception to the participants immediately after the research has been completed.

Protection from harm

The BPS ethical guideline states that *'Investigators have a primary responsibility to protect participants from physical and mental harm during the investigation'*.

But, no investigation is risk free; the guiding principle is that **risks should be no greater than the risks participants are exposed to in their normal lifestyles**. Participants should be encouraged to contact the investigator after the research if they have any worries or concerns. The investigator has a responsibility to detect and remove any consequences of the research.

Confidentiality

Protection from harm involves confidentiality. Participants may be asked personal questions. **They must be told that there is no need to answer these questions and, if they do that their answers will be treated in confidence**. That is, they should remain anonymous. Invasion of privacy can result in unease or distress. The **BPS states that unless people have given their consent, they should only be observed in situations where they would expect to be observed by strangers**. This limits observational research to public places.

Withdrawal

Participants should have the right to withdraw from an investigation at any time. This is true even if they are being paid to take part. They should be told this at

the start of the research. No attempt should be made to encourage or persuade them to remain.

Debriefing

Debriefing involves **telling it all after the investigation is complete.** Researchers should discuss the aims of the research with the participants, making sure they understand how they have contributed to meeting those aims. **Any deception is disclosed, explained and justified.** Attempts are made to undo any negative effects of the research. Codes of conduct for research state that all participants have a right to a debriefing session after the investigation has been completed. But, participants may be reluctant to express negative feelings during debriefing due to embarrassment or not wanting to upset the researcher.