

What is Ethics?

Ethics¹ is the branch of study dealing with what is the proper course of action for humans. It answers the question, "What do I do?" It is the study of right and wrong in human endeavors. At a more fundamental level, it is the method by which we categorize our values and pursue them. Do we pursue our own happiness, or do we sacrifice ourselves to a greater cause? Is that foundation of ethics based on the Bible, or on the very nature of humans himself or herself, or neither?

Ethics in Psychology

Ethics are very important when carrying out any type of psychological research. Before we can begin any research method it is vital that we stick to an ethical code of practice, as we will be dealing with people. Ethics refers to the correct rules of conduct necessary when carrying out research. We have a moral responsibility to protect research participants from harm.

The British Psychological Society (BPS) has issued a code of ethics in psychology that provides guidelines for the conduct of research. Some of the more important ethical issues are as follows:

Informed Consent

Before the study begins the researcher must outline to the participants what the research is about, and then ask their consent (i.e. permission) to take part. However, it is not always possible to gain informed consent. This is acceptable if what happens to the participants is something that could easily happen to them in everyday life. For example, if the research involves observing people in a bus queue, those people may be observed by anyone when they are in the queue.

Participants must be given information relating to:

- ☐ Purpose of the research.
- ☐ Procedures involved in the research.
- ☐ All foreseeable risks and discomforts to the subject. These include not only physical injury but also possible psychological.
- ☐ Benefits of the research to society and possibly to the individual human subject.
- ☐ Length of time the subject is expected to participate.
- ☐ Person to contact for answers to questions or in the event of injury or emergency.

Debrief

Participants must be thoroughly debriefed at the end of the study. They must be given a general idea of what the researcher was investigating and why, and their part in the research should be explained. They must be told if they have been deceived and given reasons why. They must be asked if they have any questions, and those questions should be answered honestly and as fully as possible.

Protection of Participants

Researchers must ensure that those taking part in research will not be caused distress. They must be protected from physical and mental harm. This means you must not embarrass, frighten, offend, or harm participants. Normally, the risk of harm must be no greater than in ordinary life, i.e., participants should not be exposed to risks greater than or additional to those encountered in their normal lifestyles.

Deception

This is where participants are misled or wrongly informed about the aims of the research. For example, in Milgram's study of obedience the participants thought they were giving electric shocks to a learner when they answered a question wrong. In reality no shocks were given, and the learners were confederates of Milgram. This is sometimes necessary to avoid demand characteristics (i.e., the clues in an experiment which lead participants to think they know what the researcher is looking for).

However, participants must be deceived as little as possible, and any deception must not cause distress. If you have gained participants' informed consent by deception, then they will have agreed to take part without knowing what they were consenting to. The true nature of the research should be revealed at the earliest possible opportunity, or at least during debriefing. If the participant is likely to object or be distressed once they discover the true nature of the research at debriefing, then the study is unacceptable.

Objections to deception

- ☐ Violates individual's right to choose to participate.
- ☐ A questionable basis on which to build a discipline.
- ☐ Leads to distrust of psychology in the community.

¹ Landauer, J, & Rowlands, J., (2001). Ethics. Importance of Philosophy. Retrieved from: http://www.importanceofphilosophy.com/Ethics_Main.html

Confidentiality

Participants, and the data gained from them must be kept anonymous unless they give their full consent. No names must be used in a research report.

Withdrawal from an Investigation

From the very start of an investigation, participants must be aware of their right to stop participating in the study. Even at the end of the study the participant has a final opportunity to withdraw the data they have provided for the research².

Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)

Four general goals of ethics codes:

- ☑ Help establish the group as a profession
- ☑ To act as a support and a guide to individual professionals
- ☑ To help meet the responsibilities of being a profession
- ☑ To provide a statement of moral principle that helps the individual professional to resolve ethical dilemmas

CPA has four ethical principles that registered psychologists in Canada must follow. They are ranked in order of importance, so that when they are in conflict, the practitioner has a guideline to follow.

1. Respect for the dignity of persons

- a. Research participants, clients and patients are treated with dignity and are not subject to embarrassment of any kind.

2. Responsible caring

- a. The practitioner or researcher takes responsibility to care for the research participant, client, or patient.

3. Integrity in relationships

- a. The practitioner or researcher values the relationship with the research participant, client, or patient.

4. Responsibility to society

- a. The practitioner or researcher has a responsibility also to society to do what is best for the population at large³.

Applying Your Knowledge

Unethical Psychological Experiments

Read about the following experiments that have been carried out in the past. Each of them is unethical in some way.

The Aversion Project

South Africa's apartheid army forced white lesbian and gay soldiers to undergo sexual reassignment surgeries in the 1970's and the 1980's, and submitted many to chemical castration, electric shock, and other unethical medical experiments. Although the exact number is not known, former apartheid army surgeons estimate that as many as 900 forced sexual reassignment operations may have been performed between 1971 and 1989 at military hospitals, as part of a top-secret program to root out homosexuality from the service. Army psychiatrists aided by chaplains aggressively ferreted out suspected homosexuals from the armed forces, sending them discretely to military psychiatric units, chiefly ward 22 of 1 Military Hospital at Voortrekkerhoogte, near Pretoria. Those who could not be 'cured' with drugs, aversion shock therapy, hormone treatment, and other radical 'psychiatric' means were chemically castrated or given sex-change operations. Although several cases of lesbian soldiers abused have been documented so far—including one botched sex-change operation—most of the victims appear to have been young, 16 to 24-year-old white males drafted into the apartheid army.

The Monster Study

The Monster Study was a stuttering experiment on 22 orphan children in Davenport, Iowa, in 1939 conducted by Wendell Johnson at the University of Iowa. Johnson chose one of his graduate students, Mary Tudor, to conduct the experiment and he supervised her research. After placing the children in control and experimental groups, Tudor gave positive speech therapy to half of the children, praising the fluency of their speech, and negative speech therapy to the other half, belittling the children for every speech imperfection and telling them they were stutterers. Many of the normal speaking orphan children who received negative therapy in the experiment suffered negative psychological effects and some retained speech problems during their life. Dubbed "The Monster Study" by some of Johnson's peers who were horrified that he would experiment on orphan children to prove a theory, the experiment was kept hidden for fear Johnson's reputation would be tarnished in the wake of human experiments conducted by the Nazis during World War II. The University of Iowa publicly apologized for the Monster Study in 2001⁴.

² McLeod, S. A. (2007). Simply Psychology; Psychology Research Ethics. Retrieved 19 April 2012, from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/Ethics.html>

³ Seitz, J., and O'Neil, P. (year). Ethical decision-making and the Code of Ethics of the Canadian Psychological Association. *Canadian Psychology* 37(1), 23-30.

⁴ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/u-of-iowa-apologizes-for-decades-old-study-that-forced-orphans-to-stutter/>

The Stanford Prison Experiment

Famed psychologist Philip Zimbardo led this experiment to examine that behavior of individuals when placed into roles of either prisoner or guard and the norms these individuals were expected to display.

Prisoners were put into a situation purposely meant to cause disorientation, degradation, and depersonalization. Guards were not given any specific directions or training on how to carry out their roles. Though at first, the students were unsure of how to carry out their roles, eventually they had no problem. The second day of the experiment invited a rebellion by the prisoners, which brought a severe response from the guards. Things only went downhill from there. Guards implemented a privilege system meant to break solidarity between prisoners and create distrust between them. The guards became paranoid about the prisoners, believing they were out to get them. This caused the privilege system to be controlled in every aspect, even in the prisoners' bodily functions. Prisoners began to experience emotional disturbances, depression, and learned helplessness. During this time, prisoners were visited by a prison chaplain. They identified themselves as numbers rather than their names, and when asked how they planned to leave the prison, prisoners were confused. They had completely assimilated into their roles. Dr. Zimbardo ended the experiment after five days, when he realized just how real the prison had become to the subjects. Though the experiment lasted only a short time, the results are very telling. How quickly someone can abuse their control when put into the right circumstances. The scandal at Abu Ghraib that shocked the U.S. in 2004 is prime example of Zimbardo's experiment findings.

The Monkey Drug Trials

While animal experimentation can be incredibly helpful in understanding humans, and developing lifesaving drugs, there have been experiments which go well beyond the realms of ethics. The monkey drug trials of 1969 were one such case. In this experiment, a large group of monkeys and rats were trained to inject themselves with an assortment of drugs, including morphine, alcohol, codeine, cocaine, and amphetamines. Once the animals were capable of self-injecting, they were left to their own devices with a large supply of each drug.

The animals were so disturbed (as one would expect) that some tried so hard to escape that they broke their arms in the process. The monkeys taking cocaine suffered convulsions and, in some cases, tore off their own fingers (possible because of hallucinations), one monkey taking amphetamines tore all of the fur from his arm and abdomen, and in the case of cocaine and morphine combined, death would occur within 2 weeks.

Landis' Facial Expression Experiment

In 1924, Carney Landis, a psychology graduate at the University of Minnesota developed an experiment to determine whether different emotions create facial expressions specific to that emotion. The aim of this experiment was to see if all people have a common expression when feeling disgust, shock, joy, and so on.

Most of the participants in the experiment were students. They were taken to a lab and their faces were painted with black lines, in order to study the movements of their facial muscles. They were then exposed to a variety of stimuli designed to create a strong reaction. As each person reacted, they were photographed by Landis. The subjects were made to smell ammonia, to look at pornography, and to put their hands into a bucket of frogs. But the controversy around this study was the final part of the test. Participants were shown a live rat and given instructions to behead it. While all the participants were repelled by the idea, fully one third did it. The situation was made worse by the fact that most of the students had no idea how to perform this operation in a humane manner and the animals were forced to experience great suffering. For the one third who refused to perform the decapitation, Landis would pick up the knife and cut the animal's head off for them.

The consequences of the study were more important for their evidence that people are willing to do almost anything when asked in a situation like this. The study did not prove that humans have a common set of unique facial expressions.

Little Albert

John Watson, father of behaviorism, was a psychologist who was apt to using orphans in his experiments. Watson wanted to test the idea of whether fear was innate or a conditioned response. Little Albert, the nickname given to the nine-month-old infant that Watson chose from a hospital, was exposed to a white rabbit, a white rat, a monkey, masks with and without hair, cotton wool, burning newspaper, and a miscellanea of other things for two months without any sort of conditioning. The experiment began by placing Albert on a mattress in the middle of a room. A white laboratory rat was placed near Albert, and he was allowed to play with it. At this point, the child showed no fear of the rat.

Then Watson would make a loud sound behind Albert's back by striking a suspended steel bar with a hammer when the baby touched the rat. On these occasions, Little Albert cried and showed fear as he heard the noise. After this was done several times, Albert became very distressed when the rat was displayed. Albert had associated the white rat with the loud noise and was producing the fearful or emotional response of crying.

Little Albert started to generalize his fear response to anything fluffy or white (or both). The most unfortunate part of this experiment is that Little Albert was not desensitized to his fear. He left the hospital before Watson could do so.

Learned Helplessness

In 1965, psychologists Mark Seligman and Steve Maier conducted an experiment in which three groups of dogs were placed in harnesses. Dogs from group one were released after a certain amount of time, with no harm done. Dogs from group two were paired up and leashed together, and one from each pair was given electrical shocks that could be ended by pressing a lever. Dogs from group three were also paired up and leashed together, one receiving shocks, but the shocks didn't end when the lever was pressed. Shocks

came randomly and seemed inevitable, which caused “learned helplessness,” the dogs assuming that nothing could be done about the shocks. The dogs in group three ended up displaying symptoms of clinical depression.

Later, group three dogs were placed in a box with by themselves. They were again shocked, but they could easily end the shocks by jumping out of the box. These dogs simply “gave up,” again displaying learned helplessness and symptoms of clinical depression. The dogs in group 1 and 2 quickly recovered from their experience, but most dogs in group 3 had to be euthanized. Some of the dogs in group 3 did display resilience and were able to overcome their experience.

The Milgram Study

The notorious Milgram Study is one of the most well known of psychology experiments. Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist at Yale University, wanted to test obedience to authority. He set up an experiment with “teachers” who were the actual participants, and a “learner,” who was an actor. Both the teacher and the learner were told that the study was about memory and learning. The “teacher” was told they the roles had been decided randomly by a piece of paper, when in fact they were not. Both were separated into separate rooms and could only hear each other. The teacher read a pair of words, following by four possible answers to the question. If the learner was incorrect with his answer, the teacher was to administer a shock with voltage that increased with every wrong answer. If correct, there would be no shock, and the teacher would advance to the next question. In reality, no one was being shocked. A tape recorder with pre-recorded screams was hooked up to play each time the teacher administered a shock. When the shocks got to a higher voltage, the actor/learner would bang on the wall and ask the teacher to stop. Eventually all screams and banging would stop, and silence would ensue. This was the point when many of the teachers exhibited extreme distress and would ask to stop the experiment. Some questioned the experiment, but many were encouraged to go on and told they would not be responsible for any results. If at any time the subject indicated his desire to halt the experiment, he was told by the experimenter, “Please continue. “The experiment requires that you continue. It is essential that you continue. You have no other choice; you must go on.” If after all four orders the teacher still wished to stop the experiment, it was ended. Only 14 out of 40 teachers halted the experiment before administering a 450-volt shock, though every participant questioned the experiment, and no teacher firmly refused to stop the shocks before 300 volts.

In 1981, Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr. wrote that the Milgram Experiment and the later Stanford prison experiment were frightening in their implications about the danger lurking in human nature’s dark side.

The Well of Despair

Dr. Harry Harlow is most well-known for the experiments he conducted on rhesus monkeys concerning social isolation. Dr. Harlow took infant rhesus monkeys who had already bonded with their mothers and placed them in a stainless-steel vertical chamber device alone with no contact to sever those bonds. They were kept in the chambers for up to one year. Many of these monkeys came out of the chamber psychotic, and many did not recover. Dr. Harlow concluded that even a happy, normal childhood was no defense against depression.

Your example here

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