

# Ethics in Experimental Research

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# Underlying Principles of Ethics

- With power and authority come responsibility
- Researchers must guard against conflicts of interests— especially that our getting research is our own agenda, and may benefit us whereas ethics requires that participants' well-being (of particular types) comes first.
- Psychologists must follow ethics codes with respect to anyone they interact with: media, participants, other researchers, public.

# APA Ethics Code Principles

- Beneficence and non-maleficance
- Fidelity and responsibility
- Integrity
- Justice
- Respect for people's rights and dignity

# Beneficence and non- maleficance

- Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm

# Beneficence and non- malfeasance

- How can Experimenters/Researchers (Rs) do this?

# Fidelity and responsibility

- Establish trust in relationships
- Professional behavior
- Seek to manage conflicts of interest that could lead to exploitation or harm.
- Be concerned about the ethical compliance of their colleagues' scientific and professional conduct.

# Fidelity and responsibility

- How can a researcher do this?  
With whom?
- What R behavior would violate this principle?

# Integrity re Research

- Tell the truth about results, procedures, measures.
- Speak up if other researchers are dishonest about results or other aspects of research.
- Deceiving participants must ethically justifiable to maximize benefits and minimize harm, and necessary.
- Must take responsibility to correct any resulting mistrust or other harmful effects that arise from the use of deception.



# Standards for Using Deception

- Must be necessary in order to accomplish the research
- Benefits of research must outweigh risks to the participants
- Cannot deceive participants before consent – R cannot withhold information that changes the risk explained to P.

# Justice

- All persons should have access to and benefit from the contributions of psychology.

# Justice

- In practice: If research could benefit particular kinds of people, they should be enabled to be participants.
- Further, results should be shared with them.

# Respect for people's rights and dignity

- Individuals have a right to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination
- Some classes of people deserve special consideration in this regard.

Respect for  
people's  
rights and  
dignity  
-- during  
studies

- Respect for persons means respecting their behavior and feelings and beliefs.
- In general, they should not be humiliated or scorned for how they act.

Respect for  
people's  
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studies

- If their actions in a study seem, after, to reflect badly on them, the R can help to frame them in a less dignity-threatening way.



Research

Ethical  
Practice

Feedback  
Loop

- We should use research knowledge to inform our understanding of participant vulnerabilities and what (specifically) is ethical behavior for researchers.



- Example:
- Social psychology generally knows that people have a need for positive regard, both in their own eyes and the eyes of others. They also have a need to belong.
- One *could* play upon these needs to psychologically coerce people to participate and remain in experiments.
- But people are supposed to be free to participate and to stop participation.



# Essential Issue

- The relation between a (potential or actual) participant and a researcher is a *power* relationship

How ?

## Ethics re Power

- In studies: The fundamental inequality of the relationship and greater knowledge the R has (in this situation) mean there is a high obligation for Rs to watch out for Ps well-being.

## Ethics re Power

- In science generally: Experts have greater knowledge and ability to interpret information than others in general. They must use their greater capacity for others' benefit and never for their own over others'.

## Ethics re Power

- Procedures to protect against self-interested ethical violations:
- Ask a colleague who you trust to see if s/he thinks your procedure is ethical.
- Let your Expter run you in the Expt and see how it seems from those eyes.

# Ethics re Power

- Procedures to protect against self-interested ethical violations:
- Independent IRBs.
- Declarations of conflict of interest and funding.

## Ethics re Power

- Milgram (1974) said obedience expt shows that people presume they cannot leave an expt.
- This imposes on us the regular asking whether P wants to continue AND making exit easily available.

## Potential Harms of Deception

- One feels humiliated, gullible, uncertain, disrespected by being deceived.
- If deception in research induces or reinforces mistrust in authorities/experts, that could lead to future harm.



## Potential Harms of Deception

- Undermines public trust in science/scientists/practitioners
- Believing something false might lead to future harms (e.g., “you are smart” → not studying for exams)

# Debriefing Deception

- Aim: Show respect (probably by being honest)
- Reintroduce P's agency, apparent intelligence
- Reassure them of own competence, control

## Responsibilities due to Psychological Realism

- We are interested in feelings and behaviors in exptl situations because they are psychologically real.
- ∴ We have to assume that knowing this is “just temporary” or “just an experiment/game” does not protect Ps.

## Responsibilities due to Psychological Realism

- We have to take seriously that feelings and behaviors in exptl situations are real and consequential to Ps.
- ∴ If they are put in a worse position by being in a study, we have to restore them.

# The Importance of Debriefing

I highly recommend you find The Far Side © cartoon by Gary Larson, Andrews McMeel Publishers, about Edward Belcher. What a genius! I can't post it because it is his copyright.

# Process Debriefing

- Derived from the feedback loop
- A procedure is what induced the *psychologically real* processes.
- Debriefing should be an experiential process too, not just information.

# Process Debriefing

- Examples:
- For false feedback on some test– instead of just explaining that the test was fake...

# Process Debriefing

- Examples:
- For having confederate with whom participants interact pose as other participant or other genuine person...



## Procedure for Process Debriefing

- “Let’s talk about what this experiment was about” (steps back to observer POV)
- Review procedure in order but use more theoretical language. Connect some dots.

# Procedure for Process Debriefing

- Explain any between-subjects conditions (This makes what can be compared in design more apparent; P starts to formulate hypothesis).
- Use non-personal language e.g., “some participants were randomly assigned to X condition and others were...”
- Apologize now that they were not told the whole truth about the experiment. Unambiguously.

# Procedure for Engaged Debriefing

- E.g., say “By comparing X to Y, we can learn, and these things are hard to study without getting people’s genuine reactions to situations. “

## Procedure for Process Debriefing

- Make fact you deceived them VERY plain and clear.
- Repeat 3 times as you verbally review study.
- Possibly have P say it back to you. “How would you explain what I just said?”

## Procedure for Engaged Debriefing

- Provide research reason for deception.
- Why research Q is important and couldn't be answered otherwise.
- Apologize again for deceiving them.

## Procedure for Process Debriefing

- Say you did a LOT of work in order to make this seem real.
- Say that others also followed along with the experiment (implies you are not the only gullible person)

## Procedure for Process Debriefing

- Ask not to tell other potential Ps so they have same experience and you don't contaminate your participant pool.
- Don't ask them to lie, though.
- Tell them what TO say (whatever is on your ad/info sheet etc).

## Ethics in a Nutshell

- With power comes responsibility for own conduct and how one affects Ps and oversight over other Rs.
- Others come first.
- Treat people as if they have a right to autonomy and information.