

# Becoming an ethical researcher in psychology

**A**s a student psychologist you have to follow the same rules in research as the professionals. These frequently asked questions (FAQs) should help you manage some of the ethical issues that arise in student research.

All psychology courses require practical research skills, either as assessed 'coursework' or as classroom tasks on which you may be asked questions in the exam. Whatever your course, you must follow the requirements and guidance provided by your examination board, your teacher and school/college. Above all, you must follow the ethical codes of the British Psychological Society (BPS).

Ethical practice is *particularly* important in student research because students are novice researchers, and do not yet have a professional level of competence — therefore there is a greater risk of problems. In addition, student research is unlikely to eventually benefit the greater public good, therefore you cannot argue that 'the end justifies the means'. This is an argument that professional researchers may use to justify contravening some ethical principles (e.g. deception, causing stress etc.).

Find out more, and conduct two activities, using the instructions on page 18.

## The four key BPS principles are

- respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of persons
- scientific value
- social responsibility
- maximising benefit and minimising harm

Certain **aspects** of these principles commonly apply to students' practical research tasks:

- informed consent
- withdrawal
- debriefing
- privacy
- confidentiality and anonymity
- deception
- protection of participants from harm

### FAQ1

'The specification only requires students to plan a research study. We don't have to actually collect data from participants. Surely it doesn't matter if I just plan to do something unethical...?'

*Relevant principles: all*

It does matter! Research tasks work best if they are 'authentic' — that is, if they reflect real-life practices in the discipline. Creating an unethical research plan might be a dubious or misleading learning experience.

### FAQ2

'Can I deceive my participants? If I tell them in advance what it's about, the experiment won't work.'

*The relevant principles are: informed consent, deception, debrief*

You may be able to avoid deliberately misleading participants by giving them incomplete information. Minor deception may be acceptable, for example a conformity experiment using false estimates of number of pasta pieces in a jar. Either way, you must justify your decision, and inform participants about it in your debrief.

### FAQ3

'I want to study mental health/obedience to authority/child-rearing practices/addiction/sexual orientation, as this is a really important issue. Can I research it?'

*Relevant principle: privacy*

Frustrating though this is, as a novice researcher you should not ask people questions about such personal experiences. You can, however, ask people about their *attitudes* to such issues, for example in a questionnaire or interview, as long as you make it very clear in your participant information that you are *not* asking about their actual behaviour or experiences.

### FAQ4

'There are no ethical issues in my research, so do I need to write anything about ethics in my project?'

Yes, there are ethical issues! Even apparently innocuous tasks can be upsetting, for example if they trigger unwelcome memories. Try to be empathic and 'walk in the participant's shoes'. Ethical risks may be minimal but they can never be completely eliminated; you must still reflect on them and acknowledge them in your write-up.

### FAQ5

'There are hundreds of children under 16 in my school who would love to take part in my experiment. Why can't I use them as participants? I'm under 16 myself!'

*Relevant principle(s): informed consent, protection from harm*

The BPS codes require strict conditions for children and others considered 'vulnerable'. The younger the researcher, the less able they are to understand what might be involved and the higher the risk of harm. However, using 15-year-olds *may* be acceptable if your school/college allows it and if data collection is carried out under close teacher supervision, and if consent is obtained from parents as well as participants.

### FAQ6

'I've given my participants the info, got their consent and given them the debrief. That's the ethics sorted, right?'

Well no, not quite. Yes, you must always carry out all these *routine* ethical procedures (consent, etc.) which apply to virtually every piece of research. However every research study or task, including your own, will also entail *specific* ethical aspects which you should address.

### FAQ7

'Do the principles apply online? I want to do an online survey/interviews by email/do a content analysis of Facebook posts.'

*Relevant principles: consent, privacy, confidentiality*

Certain principles can be even harder to put into practice when using any form of online media in your research, for example gaining consent (traditionally a signature is obtained). Even where someone has voluntarily posted something that is visible to any user on a social network site, you should still consider issues of privacy and confidentiality if you want to use this as research data. See the *BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013).

## References

Visit [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk).

*BPS Code of Human Research Ethics* (2010). Available at: [www.tinyurl.com/q7u2crm](http://www.tinyurl.com/q7u2crm).

*BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009). Available at: [www.tinyurl.com/km7kshk](http://www.tinyurl.com/km7kshk).

*BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013). Available at: [www.tinyurl.com/kumngbx](http://www.tinyurl.com/kumngbx).

### FAQ8

'I'm not sure about the ethics of my study/I've come across an ethical issue which isn't covered in the guidance documents. What should I do...?'

The guidance documents cannot cover every eventuality, they simply provide a framework of principles to guide decision-making by researchers, who must use their professional judgment. As a novice researcher, if you are uncertain about anything at all, ask your teacher. Awareness of the limits of your competence is in itself an ethical requirement, which demands that you consult peers or those with more experience and expertise than yourself.

### A special case

'One of my participants has said she feels very depressed. What should I tell her?'

You are not a psychologist or therapist. Tell your teacher as soon as possible if a participant shows any sign of mental health problems, or says they know someone who does. It is a key element of the BPS Codes that all psychologists and researchers must be aware of the limits of their own competence.

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