



Ethical issues in social psychology

This activity will help you to...

- Understand what ethical issues are
- Identify ethical issues arising from research into conformity and obedience
- Discuss issues that have a bearing on the ethics of social influence research

What are ethical issues?

When we looked at research into obedience to authority, we asked whether there were any factors (such as sampling, ecological validity and demand characteristics) that affected how much we could trust it. Ethical issues are another way of assessing and evaluating psychological research studies, but they are not quite the same. Whereas issues of validity concern the quality of research in terms of whether the result can be trusted, ethical issues relate to whether a research study was morally acceptable.

Ethical issues arise when there is a conflict between different sets of values that relate to psychological research. For example, on the one hand we may believe that we should be honest to people because to lie to them demeans them. On the other hand, we know that a person's beliefs about the situation they are in affect their behaviour in that situation. Consequently we may think it necessary to deceive people about the true nature of the situations in which we study them. Clearly there is a conflict between the need to be honest and the need to deceive and that is why there is an issue to be resolved.

All sorts of factors can play a part in determining the ethical acceptability of a study. We will be focusing on three. These are described below.

Issue	When does it arise?	Why is it a problem?
Informed consent	When participants' agreement to take part on a study is not obtained, or when participants are not informed about the nature of what they will be asked to do before they agree to participate.	It could be considered insulting or demeaning to people to use them in a study without their permission. If they are not fully informed about the purposes or methods of a study, then they may agree to participate then later change their minds but find it difficult to withdraw because they have agreed.
Deception	When participants are deliberately misled about the aims of research or the nature of some aspect of the study in which they are taking part.	Again, it could be considered demeaning to participants to lie to them for the purposes of research. Additionally, deception may result in stress and other types of damage to the participants (see below). The use of deception could have a bearing on whether pps have given informed consent (see above).
Protection from harm	When participants are exposed to the risk that they will be psychologically damaged either in the short or long term. This may happen in a variety of ways, for example, if the participants are stressed, or if their self image is altered or damaged.	It is considered morally unacceptable for a psychologist to damage the participants in a research study.

Why Are Ethics Important?

Ethical issues are important for two main reasons. First, the aim of psychology is to increase our understanding of human behaviour in the belief that this knowledge is useful in helping people. Many psychologists would argue that this aim is incompatible with manipulating and hurting people in order to find out how they work. Second, the ethical issues raised by many studies have damaged the image of psychology in the eyes of the general public. Consequently, members of the public misunderstand the purposes of psychology and are reluctant to trust psychologists. This could lead to a situation where we run out of participants for our studies.

What You Need To Do...

Remind yourself of the following studies that we have looked at recently:

- Asch (1951) – majority influence
- Moscovici et al (1969) – minority influence
- Milgram (1963) – obedience to authority
- Hofling et al (1966) – obedience to authority

Each of these studies raises ethical issues of the type outlined above. Write a short paragraph about each study in which you:

- Identify which ethical issues it raises
- Illustrate each ethical issue by drawing attention to the relevant aspects of the research.

Here is an example to get you started:

Asch's (1951) study raises ethical issues of informed consent. This is because the participants were told that the experiment was about visual perception rather than majority influence. Additionally, the participants were deceived about the aim of the research and were misled into believing that the confederates were actually other participants. They were put under stress during the procedure, and afterwards those who conformed may have felt foolish and angry because of the deception. This may have caused them psychological harm.