Ethical issues

Michael W. Eysenck

- **Use of human participants**
  Deception, confidentiality, and the acceptable use of data from psychological studies.

- **Use of participants**
  Why use animals in research? Do animals have “rights”?

- **Socially sensitive research**
  Psychologists must consider the social consequences of their research.

- **Socially sensitive research areas**
  Research relating to race, sexual orientation, or ethnic background needs special care.

Scientists often confront important ethical questions in the course of their work. For example, was it morally defensible for physicists to develop the atomic bomb during the 1940s? Can research on human embryos be justified? Should scientists participate in the development of chemical weapons that could potentially kill millions of people? All these questions about the ethics of scientific research are hard to answer, because there are good arguments for and against each programme of research.

There are probably more major ethical issues associated with research in psychology than in any other scientific discipline. There are various reasons for this. First, all psychological experiments involve the study of living creatures (whether human or the members of some other species), and their right to be treated in a caring and respectful way can be infringed by an unprincipled or careless experimenter.

Second, the findings of psychological research may reveal what seem to be unpleasant or unacceptable facts about human nature, or about certain groups within society. No matter how morally upright the experimenter may be, there is always the danger that extreme political organisations will use the findings to further their political aims.
Third, psychological research may lead to the discovery of powerful techniques that can be used for purposes of social control. There is the danger that such techniques might be exploited by dictators or others seeking to exert unjustifiable influence on society or to inflame people’s prejudices.

**USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**

The human participant in a psychological experiment is in a rather vulnerable and exploitable position. As Kelman (1972, p.993) pointed out, “most ethical problems arising in social research can be traced to the subject’s power deficiency.”

**The power of the experimenter**

The experimenter is often a person of fairly high status (such as a university researcher or professor), and he or she has expertise and knowledge about the experimental situation which are not shared by the participant. When an experiment takes place in the laboratory, the experimenter has the advantage of operating on “home ground”, and the setting is almost entirely under his or her control. In addition, the acceptance of scientific research as an activity that is valued by society also enhances the position of power enjoyed by the experimenter.

**The power of the participant**

The position of the participant is typically very different. He or she may have lower academic status than the experimenter, and may have only a partial understanding of the purpose of the experiment. As a result, the participant assumes the experimenter knows what he or she is doing, and so surrenders control of the experimental situation to him or her. This makes it unlikely that the participant will question what is being done, or refuse to continue further with an experiment, even if he or she finds that what is involved is distasteful.

The lengths to which participants will go to fulfil what they regard as their obligations to the experimenter were shown most strikingly by Milgram (1974; see PIP Chapter 20). About half of his participants were prepared to give very severe electric shocks to another participant in a learning experiment when the experimenter told them they must. This shows a very high degree of obedience to the power and authority of the experimenter. It should be noted, however, that most of the participants did not totally surrender responsibility to the experimenter in an unthinking way. Many of those who obeyed the experimenter became very tense and uneasy as the experiment progressed, and were acutely aware of the moral dilemma in which they had been placed.

**Use of data**

Ethical problems can occur while participants are actually taking part in an experiment. They can also arise from the ways in which information gathered from an experiment is later used. Those who plan and carry out research tend to come from the more powerful and influential groups within society, whereas those who act as participants often come from weak and low-status groups. There is a danger that the knowledge obtained from an experiment might be used to the disadvantage of those who supplied the data.

For example, consider the Moynihan Report (Rainwater & Yancey, 1967). This report identified the disintegration of the black family as the most important barrier to black people’s ability to achieve equality. The ethical problem here is that the findings could have been used to discourage politicians from taking action on other fronts, such as reducing inequalities in the distribution of resources.
Changing views

Society’s views on ethically acceptable and unacceptable treatment of human participants in research have changed considerably in recent decades. Research carried out by Berkun et al. (1962) did not cause an outcry at the time, but would certainly be regarded as totally unacceptable nowadays. In one of their experiments, the participants were flying in a military plane when one of the engines failed. They were told to fill in an “emergency procedure” form for insurance purposes before the plane ditched in the sea. As you may have guessed, there was nothing actually wrong with the plane—the situation was set up on purpose by the experimenters to observe the effects of fear on behaviour.

Berkun et al. carried out another study in which soldiers were on their own out in the field, and could only communicate with base by using a radio transmitter. Some of the soldiers were exposed to explosions sounding like artillery shells, others were told that there had been an accident causing dangerous radioactive fall-out in the area, and still others were enveloped in smoke so that they thought a forest fire had broken out. When they tried to contact base, they discovered that their radio transmitters would not work.

Berkun et al. found from blood and urine samples that all three groups of soldiers differed biochemically from control soldiers who were not exposed to stress. They assessed the effects of stress on performance by seeing how rapidly the soldiers repaired the radio. Surprisingly, only soldiers exposed to the artillery shells showed worse performance on this task than the control soldiers.

Discussion points

1. Why would research such as that of Berkun et al. be regarded as ethically unacceptable nowadays?
2. Why do you think that views about the kinds of research that are ethically unacceptable have changed over the years?

KEY STUDY EVALUATION—Berkun et al.

Berkun et al.’s studies using soldiers as participants confront us with a slightly different set of ethical issues from studies that use ordinary members of the public as participants. It could be argued that soldiers are trained to follow orders without knowing the full reasoning behind those orders, and thus they are often “deceived”. However, does this justify the use of deceit in psychological experiments using soldiers? The fact that military personnel are trained to cope with high levels of stress and fear could explain some of Berkun et al.’s findings, as well as offering a rationale for such studies to be undertaken—to test the effectiveness of military training techniques.

Milgram

Milgram’s (1974) research on obedience to authority was carried out in the days before most institutions had ethical committees responsible for ensuring the ethical acceptability of all research. He asked his participants to administer very strong (and possibly lethal) electric shocks to someone who was said to suffer from a heart condition. It is very unlikely that an ethical committee would permit the type of research done by Milgram, which explains why very few such studies have been carried out in recent years. Milgram’s research failed to fulfil some criteria that are now regarded as very important. The participants were deceived about key aspects of the study, such as the fact that the other person did not actually receive any shocks. When any of the participants said they wanted to leave the experiment or to stop giving electric shocks, they were told that they had to continue with the experiment. Nowadays it is standard practice to make it clear to participants that they have the right to withdraw from the experiment at any time without providing an explanation. However, Milgram’s research did provide us with important insights into obedience to authority.

Zimbardo

Zimbardo’s (1973) Stanford prison experiment is another study from many years ago that raises considerable ethical issues. In this study, a mock prison was set up with mock guards and mock prisoners. Some of the mock guards behaved very aggressively, causing four of the mock prisoners to be released because of “extreme depression, disorganised...
thinking, uncontrollable crying and fits of rage” (Zimbardo, 1973). Savin (1973) compared Zimbardo to used-car salesmen and others “whose roles tempt them to be as obnoxious as the law allows.” He concluded that:

Professors who ... deceive, humiliate, and otherwise mistreat their students, are subverting the atmosphere of mutual trust and intellectual honesty without which, as we are fond of telling outsiders who want to meddle in our affairs, neither education nor free inquiry can flourish.

Zimbardo pointed out that all of his participants had signed a formal informed consent form, which indicated that there would be an invasion of privacy, loss of some civil rights, and harassment. He also noted that day-long debriefing sessions were held with the participants, so that they could understand the moral conflicts being studied. However, Zimbardo failed to protect his participants from physical and mental harm. It was entirely predictable that the mock guards would attack the mock prisoners, because that is exactly what had happened in a pilot study that Zimbardo carried out before the main study.

**General principles**

Most ethical problems in human research stem from the participant being typically in a much less powerful position than the experimenter. It follows that steps need to be taken to ensure that the participant is not placed in a powerless and vulnerable position.

**Consent and deception**

In general, the easiest method to empower the participant is to make sure he or she is told precisely what will happen in the course of the experiment. After that, he or she is asked to give voluntary informed consent to take part. However, small children are unable to provide informed consent, and there are some types of experiments in which deception is an essential feature of the research. Deception is certainly widespread. Menges (1973) considered about 1000 experimental studies that had been carried out in the United States. Full information about what was going to happen was provided in only 3% of cases.

A well-known example of research involving deception is the work of Asch (1956; see PIP Chapter 20). He gave participants the task of deciding which one of three lines was equal in length to a standard line. This task was done in groups of between four and eleven people, all but one of whom were “stooge” participants working under instructions from the experimenter. The participants gave their judgements one at a time, and the seating was arranged so that the genuine participant gave his or her opinion last. On key trials, all the stooge participants gave the same wrong answer. The aim of the experiment was to see whether the genuine participants would conform to group pressure, which happened on about one-third of the trials. If the participants had been told the experiment was designed to study conformity to group pressure, and that all the other participants were stooges of the experimenter, then this important study would have been pointless.

One possible reaction is to argue that there should never be any deception in psychological experiments, even if that means that some lines of research have to stop. However, this ignores the fact that many forms of deception are entirely harmless. For example, some memory researchers are interested in incidental learning, which involves people’s ability to remember information they were not asked to remember. This can only be done by deceiving the participants as to the true purpose of the experiment until the memory test is presented.

When is deception justified? There is no simple answer. Various relevant factors need to be taken into consideration. First, the less potentially damaging the consequences of the
Ethical issues

One way of avoiding the ethical problems associated with deception is the use of role-playing experiments. The participants are asked to play the role of participants in a deception experiment, but they are told beforehand about the experimental manipulations. This approach eliminates the ethical problems of deception studies, but it is not clear that it is a satisfactory way of studying behaviour. As Freedman (1969) pointed out, what we are likely to obtain from role-playing studies are “people’s guesses as to how they would behave if they were in a particular situation.”

**Right to withdraw**

Whether or not an experiment involves deception, there are other important safeguards that should be built into nearly all experiments on humans. It should be made clear to the participants at the outset of the experiment that they have the **right to withdraw** from the experiment at any time. Furthermore, they do not have to say why they are withdrawing from the experiment if they choose not to do so. If the participants wish, they can also

---

**Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina**

Another way of handling the deception issue was used by Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina (1982). Their participants were told that they were taking part in market research. They were videotaped while they discussed in groups what was described as a forthcoming court case concerning the manager of a filling station who had lost his franchise because he was living with someone to whom he was not married. The man had decided to sue the company for breach of contract and for invasion of privacy.

The experimenters made repeated efforts to persuade the participants to argue for a point of view different from their own. What was of major interest to Gamson et al. was the extent to which the participants would be willing to go along with these attempts at persuasion. In fact, nearly all the groups refused to continue at some point, because they resented being manipulated by the experimenter.

The participants clearly needed to be deceived for the experiment to be carried out. Gamson et al. addressed this ethical issue by arranging for all the potential participants to be telephoned beforehand. They were asked whether they would be willing to take part in research in which they would be misled about its purpose until after it was over. Only those who indicated that they were willing to do this were later recruited for the actual experiment.

**Discussion points**

1. Could the approach adopted by Gamson et al. be adapted to handle the deception issue in most kinds of research?
2. Are there any ethical problems with the approach used by Gamson et al.?
insist that the data they have provided during the experiment should be destroyed. The right to withdraw, when coupled with voluntary informed consent, helps to ensure that those taking part in research are not powerless and vulnerable.

**Debriefing**

Another important safeguard in experimental research is debriefing. There are two main aspects to debriefing:

1. Provision of information about the experiment.
2. Attempts to reduce any distress that may have been caused by the experiment.

However, as is pointed out in *Ethical principles for conducting research with human participants* (published by the BPS in 2000; reproduced on pp.26–28), the fact that participants are debriefed does not justify carrying out any unethical procedures.

**Confidentiality and stress**

Another safeguard that is increasingly built into experimental research is that of confidentiality. The convention in psychology is for published accounts of research to refer to group means, but to withhold information about the names and the performance of individuals. If the experimenter cannot guarantee anonymity, then this should be made clear to potential participants beforehand. There are very exceptional cases in which it is appropriate to ignore confidentiality. Suppose, for example, that the behaviour of a severely depressed patient in an experiment leads the researcher to suspect that he or she may commit suicide. It may then be necessary for the well-being of the patient to break the confidentiality rule.

At a more general level, it is essential that investigators ensure that they protect those who participate in their studies. Of particular importance is the need to protect them from stress, however this might be created.

**Outside the laboratory**

Finally, there are issues that arise with observational research or field experiments, in which people are observed in real-life settings rather than in the laboratory. According to the ethical principles of the British Psychological Society, such observations should not be...
Ethical issues

made when the participants would not normally expect to be observed by strangers, unless informed consent is given beforehand.

**Ethical committees**

One way of trying to ensure that psychological research is ethically acceptable is by setting up *ethical committees*. Most institutions (e.g. universities; research units) in which

- Have the participants given their consent to take part in the study?
  - *YES*
- Have the participants been informed about the true nature of the study?
  - *NO*
  - Are the participants being deceived about the true nature of the study?
    - *YES*
    - Is this justifiable?
    - *YES*
- Have you explained that all details about the participants will remain confidential?
  - *YES*
- Will all participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to justify their actions?
  - *YES*
- Have the participants been informed that they will be debriefed at the end of the study, their role fully explained, and an opportunity given to see the completed study?
  - *YES*
- Have the participants been protected from any form of psychological, emotional, social, and physical distress?
  - *YES*
- Your research design may meet the ethical guidelines. This is essential to any form of research at whatever level.

*Without ethical guidelines, how difficult would it be to express misgivings about questionable research methods?*
research is carried out now have their own ethical committee, which considers all research proposals from the perspective of the rights and dignity of the participants. The existence of such committees helps to correct the power imbalance between experimenter and participant. However, if all the members of an ethical committee are researchers in psychology, they may be disinclined to turn down proposals from professional colleagues. For this and other reasons, it is desirable for every ethical committee to include some non-psychologists and at least one non-expert member of the public.

**Ethical guidelines**

In many countries, professional bodies of psychologists maintain an active involvement in ensuring that all psychological research conforms to ethical principles. For example, the British Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association have published detailed guidelines for the ethical conduct of research in Britain and the United States, respectively. These guidelines include several conditions designed to protect human participants, including voluntary participation, informed consent, right to withdraw, privacy, and freedom from harm.

The Ethical principles for conducting research with human participants issued by the British Psychological Society should be followed by all researchers in the United Kingdom, including students carrying out experiments as part of their course. The key to conducting experiments in an ethically acceptable way is expressed in the following way in these guidelines:

*The essential principle is that the investigation should be considered from the standpoint of all participants; foreseeable threats to their psychological well-being, health, values or dignity should be eliminated.*

In the United States, every complaint against psychologists is investigated by the American Psychological Association’s Committee on Scientific and Professional Ethics. If the complaint is found to be justified, then the psychologist concerned is either suspended or expelled from the Association.

**Cross-cultural issues**

Kimmel (1996) compared the ethical codes produced by 11 different countries. An ethical code in psychology was first published in the United States in 1953. Several other countries (Australia, France, Germany, and The Netherlands) followed in the 1960s. The United Kingdom had its first ethical code in psychology in 1978, followed by Slovenia (1982), Canada (1986), and Scandinavia (1989). Finally, Spain and Switzerland produced ethical codes in the early 1990s.

---

**CASE STUDY: Drawing Santa Claus**

Some studies that involve deception of participants can still be regarded as ethically acceptable. One such study was carried out by Solley and Haigh in 1957 (described in Solley & Murphy, 1960). It involved a study on children focusing on a phenomenon resembling “perceptual set”. Perceptual set is a bias to perceive a stimulus in a particular way as opposed to any other way, and can arise from external cues (the environment) or internal forces (emotions) which make the individual more sensitive to the stimuli.

In their study, Solley and Haigh asked children aged between 4 and 8 to draw pictures of Santa Claus and his gifts. The children drew their pictures before and after Christmas. Solley and Haigh suggested that emotional set (anticipation of the excitement of Christmas) would lead to increased sensitivity resulting in larger, more elaborate drawings before Christmas, whereas after Christmas, reduced sensitivity would lead to smaller, less detailed drawings. The study indicated that increased sensitivity had indeed affected perceptual organisation.

The children involved in this study were deceived about the real reason for the research. In order to produce natural and realistic results, the children had to be naive about what might be expected of them. However, in this case deception did not lead to the participants experiencing any form of stress and so could be justified. This study was also ecologically valid, as it generated valuable insights into the effect of perceptual set.
There are important similarities among the ethical codes produced by the various countries. Most focus on three basic principles:

1. Protection of individuals from physical harm.
2. Protection of individuals from psychological harm.
3. Confidentiality of the data obtained from individual participants.

It is argued in nearly all of the ethical codes that informed consent and avoidance of deception are important in ensuring that the first two principles are achieved.

There are some differences in the ethical codes adopted by different countries. The French ethical code emphasises the fundamental rights of individuals, but has little to say about the ways in which research should be conducted, or on the importance of informed consent. The British ethical code differs from many others in that it is mainly concerned with research rather than the ethical issues posed by the professional activities of clinical psychologists. The ethical code in the Netherlands contains many very general statements, and so is hard to use in practice. One example is as follows: “The psychologist shall not employ methods that are in any way detrimental to the client’s dignity or that penetrate into the client’s private life deeper than is necessary for the objectives set.” Another example is: “The psychologist shall do everything within his power to ensure that the client is entirely free to decide in a responsible manner whether to enter into the professional relationship.”

There is a valuable feature of the American and Canadian ethical codes that is absent from the other nine. These two codes made use of an empirical approach, in which professional psychologists were asked to indicate how they personally resolved ethical issues. As a result, the American and Canadian codes contain case examples and applications of key research principles. These concrete examples make it easier for psychologists to follow ethical principles in the ways intended.

USE OF ANIMALS

Animals and medicines

Animal work has been very useful in the medical field, and has led to the saving of millions of human lives. For example, Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin in 1928. However, it was only in 1940 that research on mice showed that penicillin was a very effective antibiotic. Another example concerns kidney dialysis, which is required by about 200,000 people every year in the United States if they are to stay alive. The drug heparin is essential for dialysis, and it has to be extracted from animal tissues, and then tested for safety on anaesthetised animals.

Animals and psychological research

The benefits of animal research are less clear in psychology than in medicine. However, there are several reasons why psychologists use non-human animals in so many of their experiments. It is possible (although there are major ethical considerations) to carry out surgical procedures on animals that simply would not be permissible with humans. Gray (1985) discussed animal research designed to identify those parts of the brain associated with anxiety. This animal research stemmed from work on humans, in which it was found that anti-anxiety drugs such as the benzodiazepines and alcohol had 19 separate effects. These findings were compared against those of animal studies in which the effects of septo-hippocampal lesions or cuts were observed. The effects of these lesions were very similar to those of anti-anxiety drugs in humans in 18 out of 19 cases. It is probable that the septo-hippocampal system is involved in anxiety, and so lesions or cuts in it produce the same non-anxious behaviour as anti-anxiety drugs.
Social deprivation

It is possible to expose non-human animals to prolonged periods of social or other forms of deprivation. For example, studies have been carried out on monkeys who were not allowed to interact with other monkeys for the first few months of life. When monkeys who had been brought up in isolation were brought together, they reacted very aggressively (Harlow & Mears, 1979). Early isolation also produced a virtual absence of a sex life in adulthood. These findings indicate the potentially severe effects of social isolation.

Heredity and early experiences

The members of many species develop and reproduce over much shorter time periods than do members of the human species. As a result, it is much more feasible to carry out studies focusing on the effects of either heredity or early experience on behaviour in such species. For example, in one study a breeding programme was used to produce rats who were either reactive or non-reactive to loud noise and bright lights (Eysenck & Broadhurst, 1964). The reactive rats were found to be much more anxious than the non-reactive ones in a wide range of situations. These findings suggest that individual differences in anxiety depend in part on genetic factors.

Behaviour

It is generally accepted that the human species is more complex than other species. It may thus be easier to understand the behaviour of other species than that of humans. This makes animal research very useful, provided we assume that other species are broadly similar to our own. This line of argument was used by the behaviourists to justify the fact that rats (rather than humans) were used in most of their experiments.

Much animal research is acceptable to nearly everyone. Malim, Birch, and Wadeley (1992) discussed examples of such animal research. One programme of research was designed to provide us with a better understanding of the behaviour of animals that damage crops. This research led to the development of more effective scarecrows, so that more unpleasant methods of preventing crop damage (e.g. poison) were no longer needed. In this case, animal research actually served to produce a large reduction in animal suffering.

Another example of animal research that was almost entirely beneficial in its effects was reported by Simmons (1981). Pigeons were carefully trained by means of operant conditioning to detect life rafts floating on the sea. Pigeons have excellent vision, and so their detection performance was much better than that of helicopter crews: 85% detection compared to only 50%. In this case, animal research has enabled many human lives to be saved.

Psychological examinations of animals can produce benefits for the animals themselves as well as for humans. Examples include wildlife management programmes, efforts to preserve endangered species, and conservation programmes (Cardwell et al., 1996).

Numbers of animals used

How many animals are used in psychological research? Thomas and Blackman (1991) answered that question for psychology departments in the United Kingdom in 1977 and 1989. The figure for the earlier year was 8694 animals, whereas it was only 3708 animals in 1989. This dramatic reduction over a 12-year period has almost certainly continued since 1989. Several species were used in psychological research, but about 95% of the total was accounted for by just three species: the mouse, the rat, and the pigeon.

The total figures for animal research of all kinds are declining year by year, but are still very high. According to Mukerjee (1997), about 1.5 million primates, dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits, hamsters, and other similar species are used in laboratories in the United States each year. In addition, however, about 17 million rats, mice, and birds are used in American research every year.
Society’s views

In the long run, the ethical principles applied to animal research depend on the views of society at large. However, there are enormous differences of opinion among members of the public. Some people are totally opposed to all animal experiments, whereas others are in favour of animal experiments so long as unnecessary suffering is avoided. In order to obtain some factual information, Furnham and Pinder (1990) gave a questionnaire examining attitudes to animal experimentation to 247 young adults. Their average views were not extremely for or against animal research. For example, they agreed on average with the statements that “Research from animal labs produces great benefits in the lives of both animals and people”, and “There should be more animal experimentation in areas of medicine where cures are not yet known (AIDS etc.)”, and they disagreed with the statement, “I believe in total abolition of animal experiments”. On the other hand, they agreed that “All lethal experiments on animals of all sorts should be banned”, and “There is no justification for the use of animal experimentation in the testing of cosmetics”, and they disagreed with the statement that “Fundamental (for no specific purpose) research using animals is valid”.

Furnham and Pinder found that different groups varied in terms of how much they were opposed to animal experimentation. Females were more opposed than males, left-wing people were more opposed than right-wing people, and vegetarians were more opposed than non-vegetarians. Other studies have indicated that people who are older or less educated tend to be more in favour of animal experiments than those who are younger or better educated (Mukerjee, 1997). Thus, no set of ethical principles for animal experimentation could possibly satisfy all of these different groups of people.

Cross-cultural differences

There are also important cultural differences in attitudes towards animal research. Mukerjee pointed out that there is a higher level of public support for animal research in the United States than in Europe. However, even in the United States, there has been a decline in support. In 1985, 63% of Americans agreed with the statement that “scientists should be allowed to do research that causes pain and injury to animals like dogs and chimpanzees if it produces new information about human health problems”. Ten years later, that figure had dropped to 53%.

Change over time

It is not surprising that the views of society have changed over the years. As Herzog (1988) pointed out, our moral codes depend on what he referred to as “human psychology”. In other words, our particular values, emotions, and beliefs determine our position on ethical issues. Herzog argued that an alternative approach would be one based on “pure reason”, but ethical issues do not lend themselves to any simple logical resolution.
Speciesism

Human participants in experiments must have their rights and feelings protected by requiring experimenters to follow strict ethical guidelines. However, a key issue is whether non-human participants deserve (as far as possible) to be as fully protected as humans by ethical guidelines. This issue relates to the notion of speciesism, which is “discrimination and exploitation based upon a difference in species” (Ryder, 1990). As we will see, some experts (e.g. Gray, 1991) are in favour of speciesism, whereas others (e.g. Ryder, 1990, 1991; Singer, 1991) are strongly opposed to it.

Gray accepted that it is ethically wrong to inflict unnecessary pain on the members of any species. However, he also argued that, “we owe a special duty to members of our own species” (1991, p.197). It is thus acceptable to inflict a fairly high level of suffering on animals to avoid a smaller level of suffering by humans, as is often the case in medical research. However, Gray accepted that there comes a point at which the level of suffering inflicted on animals becomes unacceptable. Gray's major reason for believing in speciesism is that, “It is likely … to be better for lions, tigers, mice and men if they each put the interests of their conspecifics [members of their own species] ahead of those of members of other species” (1991, p.198). In his opinion, there are powerful evolutionary and biological reasons for this preference.

Speciesism and racism

According to Singer (1991), the notion that we should put the interests of our own species above those of other species can lead to the idea that we should give preference to the members of our own race over those of other races. Thus, there are links between speciesism and racism, and both should be avoided. However, while he regarded himself as a non-speciesist, Singer was willing to favour the human species over other species in certain circumstances. For example, if he saw a lion fighting a man, he would shoot the lion rather than let the man die. His reasoning was that it is better to save the life of a being that can plan for the future than a being that cannot.

Ryder (1991, p.201) put forward a powerful argument against speciesism. He proposed that speciesism, racism, and sexism all

\textit{discriminate unjustly against individuals on irrelevant grounds such as skin colour, physical sexual characteristics and quadrupedality [having four legs]. The infliction of pain or distress upon others without consent is wrong—regardless of their race, sex, or species.}

Ryder also rejected Gray's argument that speciesism is acceptable because it has biological origins. According to him, what is ethically right should not be based on biology. As Ryder pointed out, “Presumably, Gray would also defend rape, pillage, and murder ... where these behaviours have ‘biological origins' ” (1991, p.201).

Ethical issues

The position that is taken on the issue of using animals in research depends on how similar to humans other species are seen to be. It is much less reasonable to use animals in a wide range of experiments if they are rather similar to us than if they are very different. Views on the similarity of our species to others have changed very much over the centuries. At one extreme is the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes. He argued that animals are very much like machines, and that they lack the soul (with its powers of thinking) that is the supreme human characteristic. It follows from this position that animals are inferior to humans.

\textbf{KEY TERM}
Speciesism: discrimination and exploitation based on a difference in species.
The views of Charles Darwin (1859) stand in stark contrast to those of Descartes. According to Darwin, the human species has evolved out of other species. As a result, we are all members of the animal kingdom. It is hard from the evolutionary perspective to cling to the notion that we are radically different from other species. We may be more intelligent, of course, but this is simply a matter of degree. In support of Darwin’s argument is the fact that the basic physiology and nervous system of nearly all mammalian species are very similar.

Darwin’s (1872) work on emotions is of particular importance to the use of animals in research. He was impressed by the similarities in the expression of emotional states between humans and other species. His findings suggest that it might be unwise to assume that animals experience emotions in very different ways from humans. We cannot be certain, however, because there is no way of knowing the emotional experiences of members of other species.

Many psychologists do not believe that the human species is rather similar to other species. Humanistic psychologists argued that a key feature of humans is our need for self-actualisation, which involves full realisation of our potential in all ways. Other species lack this need, focusing instead on much more basic needs such as those for food, drink, and sex. Within the context of the humanistic approach, members of the human species are very different and much more complex than the members of any other species.

There are ethical problems for animal research regardless of the position one adopts on the issue of the relationship between the human and other species. If other species are very different from us, then studies on them cannot tell us about human behaviour. On the other hand, as Mukerjee (1997, p.77) pointed out:

\textit{If animals are close enough to humans that their bodies, brains, and even psyches \textit[minds] are good models for the human condition, then ethical dilemmas must surely arise in using them.}

\section*{Types of morality}

It is important to distinguish between \textit{absolute morality} and \textit{relative morality}. Immanuel Kant and other philosophers argued in favour of an absolute morality in which the ends cannot justify the means. In contrast, most people probably agree with the notion of relative morality, according to which the acceptability of actions is judged in terms of the benefits that accrue.

\textbf{Absolute morality.} The notion of an absolute morality may have some appeal, but it tends to be inflexible and unrealistic in practice. For example, the moral principle “Always tell the truth” sounds very reasonable. However, if a madman with a gun demands to know where your mother is, it would make very little sense to adhere to the principle.

\textbf{Relative morality.} The alternative view that the ends can justify the means is favoured by most psychologists. It was expressed in the following terms by the American Psychological Association Committee on Ethical Standards in Psychological Research: “The general ethical question is whether there is a negative effect upon the dignity and welfare of the participants that the importance of the research does not warrant.” Animal research of high quality, with minimal animal suffering, and with a high probability of benefit is the most justifiable. In contrast, animal research of poor quality, with considerable animal suffering, and with a low probability of benefit is hard to justify.

\textbf{Costs and benefits.} The notion that decisions about the use of animals in research should be based on an analysis of the benefits and costs involved is sensible. Suppose, for example, a proposed experiment will inflict considerable pain on several animals. This would surely seem less acceptable if the experiment were designed to produce improved cosmetics than if it were intended to lead to the development of treatment for a dreadful disease affecting humans.

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Key Terms} \\
\hline
\textit{Absolute morality:} this is based on the notion that the ends cannot justify the means; some acts are basically immoral regardless of the consequences they produce. \\
\textit{Relative morality:} this is based on the notion that the acceptability of any act depends in part on the benefits that it produces; in other words, the ends can justify the means. \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
In practice, however, there can be problems. First, it is often impossible to know what the benefits and costs of a piece of research are going to be until after the experiment has been carried out. Second, one person’s assessment of the benefits and costs of a piece of research may not agree with someone else’s.

**Levels of suffering.** There is the difficult matter of deciding how much suffering a given experimental procedure inflicts on an animal. As we cannot ask an animal directly what it is experiencing, we have to rely on its behaviour. However, this may be a misleading guide to its feelings. What needs to be done is to find out as much as possible about each species. In spite of the problems involved in assessing animal distress, attempts have been made in several countries such as Australia, Canada, and The Netherlands to develop pain scales. According to this form of assessment, 54% of the animals used in The Netherlands in 1995 suffered minor discomfort, 26% had moderate discomfort, and the remaining 20% suffered severe discomfort.

**Other uses of animals**

Finally, we will broaden our discussion to consider the ways in which humans (other than psychologists) treat animals. There are three main areas of concern: meat production; ill-treatment of pets; and animals kept in captivity in zoos and circuses. There is increasing criticism in all three areas. So far as meat production is concerned, it seems cruel and immoral to many people that animals such as calves and chickens are kept in severely restricted conditions so that they can scarcely move. There is also growing concern that the methods of slaughtering used in abattoirs may involve much more suffering than is generally admitted by those involved in meat production.

The UK’s Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is one of the main organisations concerned with ill-treatment of animals. Every year it deals with many thousands of cases of animals that have been starved, beaten, or ill-treated in other ways. Battersea Dogs Home in London receives many dogs every week that have simply been abandoned by their owners. There are indications that public concern at the ill-treatment of pets is growing, at least in terms of the amount of media coverage it commands.

Zoos and circuses have attracted more adverse publicity in recent years. It is argued that animals kept in captivity in relatively restricted and alien environments may suffer stress. There is also disquiet that many circus animals are degraded by being forced to perform unnatural tricks.

In sum, there is growing unease about the ways in which animals are treated. The increased focus on ethical issues in animal experimentation is part of a more general re-evaluation of our relationship with other species. Much remains to be done. However, there are encouraging signs that the rights of animals to humane treatment (whether inside or outside the laboratory) are being increasingly recognised.

**Ethical principles**

In general terms, most animal researchers subscribe to what are sometimes known as the “three Rs”:

- Replacement of animals by other research methods.
- Reduction in the number of animals used by means of more advanced statistical techniques.
- Refinement of experimental procedures to reduce animal suffering.

Use of the three Rs has proved very fruitful. For example, 5000 monkeys a year were used in the Netherlands in the 1970s to produce polio vaccines. During the 1990s, the number was reduced to only 10 monkeys.

The most obvious problem with the use of animals in research is that many of the ethical principles guiding research on human participants cannot be applied. For example, it is impossible for animals to give voluntary informed consent to take part in an experiment, and they cannot be debriefed at the end. Bateson (1986) argued that there are three main
criteria that should be taken into account when deciding whether a study on animals is justifiable (this is often known as Bateson’s decision cube):

1. The quality of the research: this can be assessed by the funding agency.
2. The amount of animal suffering: this can be assessed from the animal’s behaviour and any signs of stress.
3. Likelihood of benefit: this is important, but can be hard to judge ahead of time.

Animal research of high quality, involving minimal suffering, and with a high probability of benefit is the most justifiable. In contrast, animal research of poor quality, involving considerable suffering, and offering a low probability of benefit is hard to justify.

**UK guidelines**

It is very important for psychologists to develop ethical guidelines to protect animals’ rights, and to prevent the animals from suffering or being exploited. Most institutions regard the use of animals in research as being such a sensitive matter that it is normal practice for all proposed animal experiments to be carefully considered by an ethical committee. In the United Kingdom, the Home Office has overall control. Anyone who wants to carry out animal research must have a licence, and inspectors from the Home Office regularly inspect all animal facilities. All research on vertebrates in the United Kingdom is governed by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act of 1986. This Act contains numerous safeguards to ensure that vertebrate research is ethically sound.

Investigators in most countries who are planning studies on animals are required to make use of ethical guidelines. Within the United Kingdom, the most important guidelines are those that were issued by the British Psychological Society in 1985. These guidelines state that researchers should “avoid, or at least minimise discomfort to living animals”. They represent a systematic attempt to provide a comprehensive set of rules and recommendations to guide the behaviour of any investigators who wish to carry out experiments on non-human participants. Here are the main points of these guidelines:

- **First**, investigators must be aware of all relevant current legislation. They must comply with all of the laws protecting animals.
- **Second**, any investigator who intends to harm or stress animals in any way “must consider whether the knowledge to be gained justifies the procedure”. Thus, trivial experiments should not be carried out on animals even if it is possible that they will suffer only low levels of harm or stress.
- **Third**, account needs to be taken of the differences between species in terms of the pain or discomfort they are likely to experience from a given procedure. If there is any choice, then the members of whichever species will suffer the least should be selected.
- **Fourth**, experiments should be carefully designed in order to minimise the number of animals that are required for a given experiment. It is recommended that statistical tests allowing several factors to be considered together should be used.
- **Fifth**, experiments should not be carried out on the members of any endangered species. The only exception is if the experiment is part of a conservation programme.
- **Sixth**, investigators need to ensure that they obtain animals from reputable suppliers, and that they are provided with detailed information about their history, including any previous laboratory studies in which they have participated. In addition, investigators should confirm that animals are handled appropriately and with minimal stress on the way to the laboratory. If any animals were trapped in the wild, then the investigators should confirm that this was done as painlessly as possible.
- **Seventh**, care should be taken with respect to caging conditions. There are clear differences among species in reactions to caging in isolation and in the effects of high density or crowding. Information on the recommended requirements for the members of the species being caged should be obtained and followed.
- **Eighth**, investigators engaged in fieldwork should disturb the animals being studied as little as possible. It needs to be remembered that breeding and even survival can be markedly affected by simple observations. Marking animals for identification or attaching radio transmitters may stress them, as may their capture and recapture.

Do you think the things that are considered benefits to human society are fixed qualities, or do they vary across cultures and over time? Do the needs of human societies change over time? How might this affect how we decide whether research is ethically acceptable or not?

Field experiments can disrupt the animal’s natural environment. This can continue to be stressful to the animal long after the experiment has finished.
Ninth, animal aggression or predation should preferably be studied in the field rather than by means of staged encounters. If it is necessary to make use of staged encounters, then efforts should be made to use models or animals behind glass.

Tenth, care should be taken with studies in which animals are deprived of food or water. The key requirement is to consider the normal eating and drinking habits of the animals being studied, and also to pay attention to their metabolic requirements.

Eleventh, investigators should only use procedures causing pain or distress if there are no other ways in which the experiment can be carried out. In such cases, it is illegal for investigators in the United Kingdom to cause pain or distress unless they hold a Home Office licence together with the relevant certificates.

Twelfth, no surgical or pharmacological procedures can be carried out on vertebrate animals in the United Kingdom unless the investigators have a Home Office licence plus the relevant certificate. Further safeguards are that only experienced staff should perform these procedures, that the investigators should take steps to prevent post-operative infection, and that they know about the technical aspects of anaesthesia.

Thirteenth, it is essential that animals receive adequate care following an operation; this may involve the use of local anaesthetics and/or nursing. It is also essential that there is frequent monitoring of each animal’s condition. If an animal suffers severe and enduring pain, then it must be killed using recommended procedures for euthanasia.

Fourteenth, the investigator should obtain a second opinion if he or she is unsure about the condition of any animals involved in an experiment. This second opinion must come from someone who has no direct involvement in the experiment, and is best provided by a qualified veterinarian.

Fifteenth, there are two organisations that can be contacted if investigators are unclear about any issues relating to animal experimentation. These are the Committee of the Experimental Psychology Society and the Standing Advisory Committee on Standards for Psychological Research and Teaching Involving Animals.

Types of animal research

Most psychological investigations of animals consist of laboratory studies. However, Cuthill (1991) considered over 900 research papers, and found that 46% of them were field studies carried out in the wild. About one-third of the field studies were field experiments, meaning that they involved some kind of experimental manipulation. The four most common types of manipulation used in these studies were as follows:

1. Dummies: these were mainly stuffed dummy predators; in order to be effective, they need to be realistic, and this means that they cause much distress to animals who encounter them.
2. Non-trivial handling: tagging or marking of animals so they can be identified subsequently is an example of this; as mentioned already, this can be a stressful procedure.
3. Playback of recorded signals: these recorded signals are generally realistic; if they are alarm calls, then this can lead to high levels of distress.
4. Food addition: when the experimenter artificially introduces food into an area, it can cause territorial disputes and fights; it can also lead to undesirable changes in the availability of the animals’ normal sources of food supply. Thus, food addition can have serious consequences for the animals affected.

In order to film wildlife programmes for television, experimental manipulation techniques like the ones listed are sometimes necessary. What are the ethical implications of this?
SOCIALLY SENSITIVE RESEARCH

As we have seen, ethical guidelines focus mainly on the well-being and protection of those who participate in experiments. However, much research raises issues of relevance to society as a whole. As a result, psychologists need to be concerned about broader ethical issues. This is true of nearly all psychological research, but is especially true of socially sensitive research. This was defined by Sieber and Stanley (1988, p.49) as

*studies in which there are potential social consequences or implications either directly for the participants in research or the class of individuals represented by the research.*

Socially sensitive research can produce risks for many people other than those directly involved as participants. Among the non-participants at risk, according to Sieber and Stanley, are the following:

- Members of the groups (e.g. racial; religious) to which the participants belong.
- People closely associated with the participants (e.g. family; friends).
- The experimenter or experimenters.
- The research institution to which the experimenter or experimenters belong.

In their thorough discussion of socially sensitive research, Sieber and Stanley argued that important ethical concerns can arise with respect to four major aspects of such research:

1. Deciding on the research question or hypothesis to be tested.
2. The conduct of research and the treatment of participants.
3. The institutional context (e.g. the organisation in which the research is carried out may make unjustified use of the findings).
4. Interpretation and application of research findings, especially the application of findings in ways far removed from the intentions of the experimenter.

What are the kinds of problems that can occur in each of these aspects of research? We have already discussed at some length issues relating to the conduct of research and the treatment of participants. Accordingly, we will focus on the other three aspects here.

The research question

The first part of the research process involves deciding on the question or questions that the research is designed to answer. Simply asking certain questions can pose ethical issues. For example, suppose that a researcher asks the question, “Are there racial differences in intelligence?”, and decides to answer it in a study. It is likely (but not certain) that he or she assumes that there are racial differences in intelligence, and that this assumption is motivating the research. In similar fashion, most researchers who carry out twin studies to decide the extent to which criminality is inherited probably assume that genetic factors are important. The very fact that this issue is being investigated may cause concern to the relatives of criminals.

The institutional context

The institutional context can pose ethical issues in at least two ways. First, if the institutional context is perceived to be prestigious or intimidating, it may make the participants feel powerless and thus affect their behaviour. This happened in the work of Milgram (1974), in which he studied obedience to authority in the form of a willingness to administer very strong electric shocks (see PIP Chapter 20). When the research setting was Yale University, 65% of the participants were fully obedient. This figure dropped to 48% when the setting was a run-down office building. Second, when research is carried out in a company, there can be various ethical problems with respect to the ways in which those running the company use the findings. For example, suppose that a researcher finds that the average stress levels in a company are only moderate. This may lead the company to abandon plans to offer stress counselling to their workers.
Interpretation and application

No-one doubts that researchers should be concerned about the ways in which their findings are interpreted and applied. However, we need to distinguish between those uses of research findings that are predictable and those that are not. For example, it was predictable that the National Front and other organisations of the extreme right would use findings of racial differences in intelligence for their own ends. However, researchers studying the effects of sleep deprivation could not reasonably have expected that their findings would be used in brainwashing and cult indoctrination.

Eyewitness testimony

By now, you may have decided that socially sensitive research should be avoided altogether. However, some socially sensitive research is wholly desirable and of real benefit to society. Consider, for example, research on eyewitness testimony (see PIP Chapter 9). This research has shown convincingly that the memories of eyewitnesses for events are fragile and easily distorted. An implication is that defendants should not be found guilty solely on the basis of eyewitness identification. However, in the United States in 1973, there were nearly 350 cases in which eyewitness identification was the only evidence of guilt. In 74% of these cases, the defendant was convicted.

As a result of psychological research, courts and juries are less impressed by eyewitness testimony than used to be the case. However, there was a time when such research was ignored. The Devlin Report on Evidence of Identification in Criminal Cases was published in the United Kingdom in 1976. One of its main conclusions was as follows: “The stage seems not yet to have been reached at which the conclusions of psychological research are sufficiently widely accepted or tailored to the needs of the judicial process to become the basis for procedural change.”

Evaluation

There is some evidence that socially sensitive research (at least in the United States) is more likely than non-sensitive research to be rejected by institutional ethical committees. Ceci et al. (1985) found that the rejection rate was about twice as great. There are some valid reasons for doing this. The very fact that certain socially sensitive issues are being studied by psychologists can suggest to society at large that these issues are real and important. For example, the fact that psychologists have compared the intelligence of different races implies that there are racial differences, and that intelligence exists and can be measured.

Socially sensitive research can be used to justify various forms of discrimination against individuals or groups. In the most extreme cases, the findings of psychological studies have even been used to produce discriminatory changes in the laws and regulations within a given society. Thus, the findings of socially sensitive research can be used to justify new (and often unwarranted) forms of social control.

A case in point occurred in the United States when intelligence tests were developed in the early years of the twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1920, several American states passed laws designed to prevent certain categories of people (including those of low intelligence) from having children. Psychologists often exerted pressure to have these laws passed. For example, the prominent Californian psychologist Lewis Terman argued as follows: “If we would preserve our state for a class of people worthy to possess it, we must prevent, as far as possible, the propagation of mental degenerates.”

As a result of Terman’s views, and those of other psychologists, a Californian law of 1918 required all compulsory sterilisations to be approved by a board including “a clinical psychologist holding the degree of PhD”. In similar fashion, pressure by psychologists helped to persuade the state of Iowa to legislate in 1913 for “the prevention of the procreation of criminals, rapists, idiots, feeble-minded, imbeciles, lunatics, drunkards,
drug fiends, epileptics, syphilitics, moral and sexual perverts, and diseased and degenerate persons.”

No psychologists nowadays would agree with the introduction of such harsh measures. However, some psychologists in the second half of the twentieth century have argued that psychological principles should be used for purposes of social control. For example, B.F. Skinner claimed that we can determine and control people’s behaviour by providing the appropriate rewards at the appropriate times: “Operant conditioning shapes behaviour as a sculptor shapes a lump of clay.” Skinner (1948), in his novel Walden Two, described the use of operant conditioning to create an ideal society. He envisaged a high degree of external control in this society, with children being reared mainly by child-rearing professionals, and government being by self-perpetuating committees rather than by elected representatives.

The case in favour of socially sensitive research was made by Scarr (1988, p.56). She argued as follows:

Science is in desperate need of good studies that highlight race and gender variables ... to inform us of what we need to do to help underrepresented people to succeed in this society. Unlike the ostrich, we cannot afford to hide our heads for fear of socially uncomfortable discoveries.

Scarr made another important point, arguing that there are very good reasons why most ethical guidelines focus much more on the protection of the participants in experiments than on the protection of the groups to which they belong. In essence, researchers can usually predict fairly accurately the direct effects of their experiment on the participants. However, they are unlikely to be able to predict the indirect effects on the groups to which the participants belong until the outcomes of the experiment are known.

We have considered several advantages and disadvantages of socially sensitive research. It is important to strike a balance. The American Psychological Association tried to do this in its Ethical principles in the conduct of research with human participants (1982, p.74):

On one side is an obligation to research participants who may not wish to see derogatory information ... published about their valued groups. On the other side is an obligation to publish findings one believes relevant to scientific progress, an objective that in the investigator’s views will contribute to the eventual understanding and amelioration of social and personal problems.

SOCIA LLY SENSITIVE RESEARCH AREAS

Race-related research

The best-known (or most notorious) race-related research in psychology has focused on racial differences in intelligence, especially between blacks and whites in the United States (see PIP Chapter 21). Our concern here is with the ethical issues associated with this research. First we will consider the arguments in favour of carrying out such research, followed by the arguments against permitting such research to be done.

One of the main arguments in favour of race-related research is that researchers should be free to carry out whatever research seems important to them. If governments start passing laws to prohibit certain kinds of research, then there is a real danger that research will be stopped for political rather than for ethical reasons. What about the ethics of publishing the findings of race-related research that may be used by racists for their own unacceptable purposes? H.J. Eysenck (1981, pp.167–168) argued that

it should not be assumed that those who feel that they have a duty to society to make known the results of empirical work are guided by less lofty ethical
aspirations than those who hold the opposite view ... the obvious social problem produced by the existence of racial and class differences in ability can only be solved, alleviated or attenuated by greater knowledge ... it is ethically indefensible to refrain from acquiring such knowledge and making it available to society.

One of the strongest arguments against race-related research into intelligence is that the findings are often used in unacceptable ways. For example, Goddard (1913) gave intelligence tests to immigrants arriving in New York. He claimed that his findings demonstrated that 87% of Russians, 83% of Jews, 80% of Hungarians, and 79% of Italians were “feeble-minded”. Goddard reached this ludicrous conclusion by ignoring the obvious fact that most of these immigrants had a very limited command of the English language.

Subsequent work on immigrant soldiers in the United States seemed to confirm Goddard’s findings, while also showing that immigrants from Great Britain and Scandinavia performed better. These various findings were used by the American government in 1924 to introduce national origin quotas to reduce the level of immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

A second argument against much race-related research is that it is almost meaningless given the fact that blacks and whites in the United States do not form biological groups. It is also fairly pointless, because it is impossible to discover for certain precisely why there are race differences in intelligence. Another argument is that such research does not possess any particular scientific interest, in that it offers no prospect of shedding much light on the processes and mechanisms involved in intelligence. If it could be shown that all racial differences in intelligence are due to environmental factors, this would tell us nothing about the different problem-solving strategies used by those high and low in intelligence. Finally, such research has no obvious policy implications. It should be the goal of every society to provide good opportunities for everyone regardless of race, and this is true irrespective of the factors producing racial differences in intelligence.

Is knowing how intelligent you are important to having a happy life?

The decision to remove homosexuality from the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) was taken in the 1970s, and it was finally removed from the DSM in 1980. Before that, homosexuality was seen as abnormal behaviour that needed to be “cured” like other forms of illness.

Heterosexual bias

Morin (1977) obtained convincing evidence of heterosexual bias in his review of studies on gays and lesbians published between 1967 and 1974. He found that about 70% of these studies addressed issues such as whether homosexuals are sick, ways in which homosexuality can be identified, and the causes of homosexuality. Focusing on such issues suggests that being homosexual was regarded almost like a disease that needed to be “cured”.

This biased approach to research, with its clear implication that gays and lesbians are inferior to heterosexuals, poses serious ethical issues relating to discrimination against gays and lesbians. The American Psychological Association in 1975 took steps to prevent such discrimination by adopting the following resolution:

Homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgement, stability, reliability, or general social or vocational capabilities. Further, the American Psychological Association urges all mental health professionals to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations.

Another feature of the research reviewed by Morin (1977) was that 82% of the studies compared gays and/or lesbians against heterosexual individuals. This poses ethical problems, because it misleadingly implies that all gays and lesbians possess the same characteristics that distinguish them from heterosexuals. In fact, of course, gays, lesbians, and heterosexuals are all individuals. Knowing about someone’s sexual orientations tells us little or nothing about that person’s attitudes, personality, and behaviour.

Discussion points

1. How can alternative sexuality be studied in an ethically acceptable way?
2. Can psychological research change some of the unfortunate and misleading stereotypes that prevail in this area?
“Alternative” sexuality

According to Kitzinger and Coyle (1995), research on gays and lesbians has gone through three distinct phases:

1. **Heterosexual bias**: the notion that heterosexuality is more natural than, and superior to, homosexuality.
2. **Liberal humanism**: this is based on the assumption that homosexual and heterosexual couples have an underlying similarity in their relationships.
3. **Liberal humanism plus**: what is added to the liberal humanistic view is an increased recognition of the specific characteristics of gay and lesbian relationships.

**Liberal humanism**

The next phase of research was based on the liberal humanistic approach. This approach rejected the notion that gays and lesbians are inferior to heterosexuals, and accepted that they should be regarded as individuals rather than as members of a group defined by sexual orientation. It was accepted within this approach that homosexuality is as natural and normal as heterosexuality.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) carried out a typical study within the liberal humanistic perspective. They compared gay, lesbian, married heterosexual, and heterosexual-cohabiting couples. These couples were assessed for relationship quality based on love for partner, liking of partner, and relationship satisfaction. The gay, lesbian, and married heterosexual couples all had very similar levels of relationship quality, with heterosexual-cohabiting couples being significantly lower. These findings support the view of an underlying similarity between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

The liberal humanist approach is limited rather than ethically dubious, but it does raise ethical issues. It has two major limitations. First, there is an assumption that gays and lesbians conform to heterosexual norms in their attitudes and behaviour. As a result, according to Kitzinger and Coyle (1995, p.67), “Researchers … have tended to ignore, distort or pathologise [regard as a disease] those aspects of lesbian and gay relationships which cannot easily be assimilated into heterosexual models.” There is an ethical problem here, because it is implicitly assumed that differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals reflect badly on homosexuals.

Second, the approach tends to ignore the difficulties with which gays and lesbians have to contend in terms of the prejudices of society. Some of these difficulties were identified by Kitzinger and Coyle:

> Lesbian and gay couples are struggling to build and to maintain relationships in the context of a society which often denies their existence, condemns their sexuality, penalises their partnerships and derides their love for each other.

**Liberal humanism plus.** The third phase of research on gays and lesbians (liberal humanism plus) is gradually becoming more prominent. This approach accepts the equality of homosexuals and heterosexuals. However, it also recognises that there are some important differences between the relationships of gays and lesbians on the one hand and heterosexuals on the other, based in part on the negative views of gay and lesbian relationships adopted by large sections of society. It is the only approach that manages to avoid most ethical problems.

**Social and cultural diversity**

We have discussed the importance of ensuring that psychological research is sensitive to ethical issues relating to race and sexuality. Similar issues are raised by research that is concerned with social and/or cultural diversity. Here we will consider research on **ethnic groups**; that is, cultural groups living within a larger society. These ethnic groups can be defined in racial, religious, or other terms. The ethical issues raised by research on ethnic groups will be discussed after their position in society has been covered.
One of the key issues that members of an ethnic group have to address is that of acculturation strategy. This has two main aspects:

1. The extent to which they want to retain their original cultural identity and customs.
2. The extent to which they seek contact with other groups in society.

As Berry (1997) pointed out, the fact that people have two choices to make (each of which can be for or against) means that there are four major acculturation strategies:

- Integration: retaining one’s own cultural identity while also seeking contact with other groups.
- Separation: retaining one’s own cultural identity and avoiding contact with other groups.
- Assimilation: losing one’s own cultural identity and moving into the larger society.
- Marginalisation: relatively little contact with one’s own culture or with other cultures.

Most of the research has indicated that members of ethnic groups experience stress as they strive to find the most suitable acculturation strategy. However, the typical finding is that acculturative stress is lowest among those adopting the integration option, and is highest among those who are marginalised (Berry, 1997). As might be expected, acculturative stress is lower when there is a high level of tolerance for diverse ethnic attitudes and behaviour within the larger society.

Why are acculturation strategy and acculturative stress relevant to ethical issues? There are three main reasons. First, the fact that many members of ethnic groups experience acculturative stress means that they are on average more vulnerable psychologically than members of the dominant cultural group. Second, research findings that seem to indicate that members of an ethnic group are inferior to the dominant cultural group may make members of the dominant cultural group less willing to have contact with them. This makes it harder for members of an ethnic group to adopt the integration or assimilation strategies.

Third, research findings that cast an unfavourable light on the members of an ethnic group may make them question their own cultural values. In extreme cases, this can lead to marginalisation and to the stress caused by lacking any stable sense of cultural identity.

In sum, it is important for all investigators to have an awareness of the pressures experienced by many ethnic groups. Investigators then need to ensure that their research (and the findings resulting from it) does not increase those pressures.

**PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

I am impressed by the progress that has been made over the years in developing more ethical approaches to psychological research. In a nutshell, there is now much more recognition of the fact that we need to take full account of the needs and sensitivities of all those involved in experiments, as well as the broader society or culture in which experiments are carried out.

What is regarded as acceptable or unacceptable for psychologists to do depends very much on the prevailing cultural values and standards. Some psychologists used to treat their participants in ways that are now unthinkable. They did this not because they were wicked, but because their ethical standards resembled those of the culture in which they lived and worked.

**SUMMARY**

The participants in experiments are usually in a less powerful position than the experimenter, and this produces ethical problems. The participants should give their voluntary informed consent before taking part in an experiment. They should also be told that they
have the right to withdraw from the experiment at any time without giving a reason. At the end of the experiment, there should be a debriefing period in which the experiment is discussed fully. Another safeguard is confidentiality, with no information about individual participants being divulged. Professional organisations such as the British Psychological Society publish detailed ethical guidelines, and most research institutions have ethical committees.

Animals are used in experiments because some procedures would not be permissible with humans, because they reproduce over much shorter time periods than humans, and because it is easier to understand their behaviour. Females, left-wing people, and vegetarians are more opposed to animal experimentation than males, right-wing people, and non-vegetarians, respectively. Speciesism can be defended on the grounds that we owe a special duty to our own species, but it can be opposed on the basis that it resembles racism and sexism. Darwin argued that there are important similarities between the human species and other species, whereas the humanistic psychologists emphasised the differences. The views of most people on animal experimentation are based on relative morality. Animal experiments should be considered in the context of meat production, ill-treatment of pets, and zoos and circuses. The BPS Ethical Guidelines emphasise the necessity to comply with current legislation; the importance of the knowledge to be gained from a study; differences among species in pain sensitivity; minimising the number of animals used; not using the members of any endangered species; ensuring that reputable suppliers are used; providing suitable caging conditions; and disturbing animals as little as possible in fieldwork.

Ethical guidelines focus mainly on protection of the participants. However, it is important with socially sensitive research to consider the protection of groups to which the participants belong and those closely associated with the participants. These broader social issues need to be considered with respect to the research question selected, the conduct of the research, the institutional context, and the interpretation and application of research findings. The institutional context may make the participants feel powerless, or those running the organisation in which the research takes place may misuse the findings. The findings of socially sensitive research may be applied in dubious ways not anticipated by the researcher, or the research may be used to justify new forms of social control. On the positive side, socially sensitive research may provide useful information to help minority groups. In addition, researchers cannot generally be expected to foresee what they will find or how such findings will be used by others.

Race-related research has been defended on the grounds that researchers should be free to carry out whatever research seems important to them. An important counter-argument is that the findings of such research have sometimes been used in unacceptable ways. Race-related research on intelligence in the United States is almost meaningless, because blacks and whites do not form distinct biological groups. In addition, it is not possible to discover for certain why race differences occur. Early research on “alternative” sexuality suffered from heterosexual bias. This was replaced by a liberal humanistic approach that assumed that gays and lesbians conform to heterosexual norms in their attitudes and behaviour, and that minimised the specific problems encountered by gays and lesbians. More recently, an ethically acceptable approach (which may be called liberal humanism plus) has evolved. Ethnic groups often experience acculturative stress. Investigators need to ensure that their research does not interfere with the attempts to members of ethnic minorities to use a suitable acculturation strategy.

**Further Reading**

- Many of the issues discussed in this chapter are also dealt with in M.W. Eysenck (1994), *Perspectives on psychology*, Hove, UK: Psychology Press. Another textbook in this area is A. Wadeley, A. Birch, and A. Malim (1997), *Perspectives in psychology*
REFERENCES


Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants

Reproduced from The British Psychological Society’s Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles & Guidelines (November 2000, pp. 8–11)

1 Introduction
1.1 The principles given below are intended to apply to research with human participants. Principles of conduct in professional practice are to be found in the Society’s Code of Conduct and in the advisory documents prepared by the Divisions, Sections and Special Groups of the Society.
1.2 Participants in psychological research should have confidence in the investigators. Good psychological research is possible only if there is mutual respect and confidence between investigators and participants. Psychological investigators are potentially interested in all aspects of human behaviour and conscious experience. However, for ethical reasons, some areas of human experience and behaviour may be beyond the reach of experiment, observation or other form of psychological investigation. Ethical guidelines are necessary to clarify the conditions under which psychological research is acceptable.
1.3 The principles given below supplement for researchers with human participants the general ethical principles of members of the Society as stated in the British Psychological Society’s Code of Conduct (q.v). Members of the British Psychological Society are expected to abide by both the Code of Conduct and the fuller principles expressed here. Members should also draw the principles to the attention of research colleagues who are not members of the Society. Members should encourage colleagues to adopt them and ensure that they are followed by all researchers whom they supervise (e.g. research assistants, postgraduate, undergraduate, A-Level and GCSE students).
1.4 In recent years, there has been an increase in legal actions by members of the general public against professionals for alleged misconduct. Researchers must recognise the possibility of such legal action if they infringe the rights and dignity of participants in their research.

2 General
2.1 In all circumstances, investigators must consider the ethical implications and psychological consequences for the participants in their research. The essential principle is that the investigation should be considered from the standpoint of all participants; foreseeable threats to their psychological well-being, health, values or dignity should be eliminated. Investigators should recognise that, in our multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society and where investigations involve individuals of different ages, gender and social background, the investigators may not have sufficient knowledge of the implications of any investigation for the participants. It should be borne in mind that the best judges of whether an investigation will cause offence may be members of the population from which the participants in the research are to be drawn.

3 Consent
3.1 Whenever possible, the investigator should inform all participants of the objectives of the investigation. The investigator should inform the participants of all aspects of the research or intervention that might reasonably be expected to influence willingness to participate. The investigator should, normally, explain all other aspects of the research or intervention about which the participants enquire. Failure to make full disclosure prior to obtaining informed consent requires additional safeguards to protect the welfare and dignity of the participants (see Section 4).
3.2 Research with children or with participants who have impairments that will limit understanding and/or communication such that they are unable to give their real consent requires special safeguarding procedures.
3.3 Where possible, the real consent of children and of adults with impairments in understanding or communication should be obtained. In addition, where research involves any persons under 16 years of age, consent should be obtained from parents or from those in loco parentis. If the nature of the research precludes consent being obtained from parents or permission being obtained from teachers, before proceeding with the research, the investigator must obtain approval from an Ethics Committee.
3.4 Where real consent cannot be obtained from adults with impairments in understanding or communication, wherever possible the investigator should consult a person well-placed to appreciate the participant’s reaction, such as a member of the person’s family, and must obtain the disinterested approval of the research from independent advisors.
3.5 When research is being conducted with detained persons, particular care should be taken over informed consent, paying attention to the special circumstances which may affect the person’s ability to give free informed consent.
3.6 Investigators should realise that they are often in a position of authority or influence over participants who may be their students, employees or clients. This relationship must not be allowed to pressurise the participants to take part in, or remain in, an investigation.
3.7 The payment of participants must not be used to induce them to risk harm beyond that which they risk without payment in their normal lifestyle.
3.8 If harm, unusual discomfort, or other negative consequences for the individual’s future life might occur, the investigator must obtain the disinterested approval of independent advisors, inform the participants, and obtain informed, real consent from each of them.

3.9 In longitudinal research, consent may need to be obtained on more than one occasion.

4 Deception

4.1 The withholding of information or the misleading of participants is unacceptable if the participants are typically likely to object or show unease once debriefed. Where this is in any doubt, appropriate consultation must precede the investigation. Consultation is best carried out with individuals who share the social and cultural background of the participants in the research, but the advice of ethics committees or experienced and disinterested colleagues may be sufficient.

4.2 Intentional deception of the participants over the purpose and general nature of the investigation should be avoided whenever possible. Participants should never be deliberately misled without extremely strong scientific or medical justification. Even then there should be strict controls and the disinterested approval of independent advisors.

4.3 It may be impossible to study some psychological processes without withholding information about the true object of the study or deliberately misleading the participants. Before conducting such a study, the investigator has a special responsibility to (a) determine that alternative procedures avoiding concealment or deception are not available; (b) ensure that the participants are provided with sufficient information at the earliest stage; and (c) consult appropriately upon the way that the withholding of information or deliberate deception will be received.

5 Debriefing

5.1 In studies where the participants are aware that they have taken part in an investigation, when the data have been collected, the investigator should provide the participants with any necessary information to complete their understanding of the nature of the research. The investigator should discuss with the participants their experience of the research in order to monitor any unforeseen negative effects or misconceptions.

5.2 Debriefing does not provide a justification for unethical aspects of an investigation.

5.3 Some effects which may be produced by an experiment will not be negated by a verbal description following the research. Investigators have a responsibility to ensure that participants receive any necessary debriefing in the form of active intervention before they leave the research setting.

6 Withdrawal from the investigation

6.1 At the onset of the investigation investigators should make plain to participants their right to withdraw from the research at any time, irrespective of whether or not payment or other inducement has been offered. It is recognised that this may be difficult in certain observational or organisational settings, but nevertheless the investigator must attempt to ensure that participants (including children) know of their right to withdraw. When testing children, avoidance of the testing situation may be taken as evidence of failure to consent to the procedure and should be acknowledged.

6.2 In the light of experience of the investigation, or as a result of debriefing, the participant has the right to withdraw retrospectively any consent given, and to require that their own data, including recordings, be destroyed.

7 Confidentiality

7.1 Subject to the requirements of legislation, including the Data Protection Act, information obtained about a participant during an investigation is confidential unless otherwise agreed in advance. Investigators who are put under pressure to disclose confidential information should draw this point to the attention of those exerting such pressure. Participants in psychological research have a right to expect that information they provide will be treated confidentially and, if published, will not be identifiable as theirs. In the event that confidentiality and/or anonymity cannot be guaranteed, the participant must be warned of this in advance of agreeing to participate.

8 Protection of participants

8.1 Investigators have a primary responsibility to protect participants from physical and mental harm during the investigation. 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. Where the risk of harm is greater than in ordinary life, the provisions of 3.8 should apply. Participants must be asked about any factors in the procedure that might create a risk, such as pre-existing medical conditions, and must be advised of any special action they should take to avoid risk.

8.2 Participants should be informed of procedures for contacting the investigator within a reasonable time period following participation should stress, potential harm, or related questions or concern arise despite the precautions required by the Principles. Where research procedures might result in undesirable consequences for participants, the investigator has the responsibility to detect and remove or correct these consequences.

8.3 Where research may involve behaviour or experiences that participants may regard as personal and private the participants must be protected from stress by all appropriate measures, including the assurance that answers to personal questions need not be given. There should be no concealment or deception when seeking information that might encroach on privacy.

8.4 In research involving children, great caution should be exercised when discussing the results with parents, teachers or others in loco parentis, since evaluative statements may carry unintended weight.

9 Observational research

9.1 Studies based upon observation must respect the privacy and psychological well-being of the individuals studied. Unless those observed give their consent to being observed, observational research is only acceptable in situations where
those observed would expect to be observed by strangers. Additionally, particular account should be taken of local cultural values and of the possibility of intruding upon the privacy of individuals who, even while in a normal public space, may believe they are unobserved.

10 Giving advice

10.1 During research, an investigator may obtain evidence of psychological or physical problems of which a participant is, apparently, unaware. In such a case, the investigator has a responsibility to inform the participant if the investigator believes that by not doing so the participant’s future well-being may be endangered.

10.2 If, in the normal course of psychological research, or as a result of problems detected as in 10.1, a participant solicits advice concerning educational, personality, behavioural or health issues, caution should be exercised. If the issue is serious and the investigator is not qualified to offer assistance, the appropriate source of professional advice should be recommended. Further details on the giving of advice will be found in the Society’s Code of Conduct.

10.3 In some kinds of investigation the giving of advice is appropriate if this forms an intrinsic part of the research and has been agreed in advance.

11 Colleagues

11.1 Investigators share responsibility for the ethical treatment of research participants with their collaborators, assistants, students and employees. A psychologist who believes that another psychologist or investigator may be conducting research that is not in accordance with the principles above should encourage that investigator to re-evaluate the research.

Reference

The British Psychological Society. (November 2000). Ethical principles for conducting research with human participants. This document has appeared at various times in the Bulletin of The British Psychological Society, The Psychologist, or a Charter Guide for the guidance of Members of the Society. Published by The British Psychological Society, St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR.