5.1 Ethical considerations in psychological research

The term ethics refers to moral principles and codes of behaviour that apply to all psychologists, regardless of the field in which they work. The Australian Psychological Society (APS) has developed a Code of Ethics (2007) – as well as a complementary publication called Ethical Guidelines (2010) – that outlines the ethical guidelines that govern psychologists' behaviour. The Ethical Guidelines are regularly updated, and the most current guidelines can be viewed on the APS website: www.psychology.org.au.

Interestingly, over the years, ethical guidelines governing psychological research have become stricter, so that several psychological experiments conducted in the past would be considered unethical by today's standards.

Prior to the commencement of any research, the researcher submits a research plan to an ethics committee for approval. This ensures that participants' welfare is considered by a range of medical and non-medical professionals. The ethics committee also investigates potential benefits of the research to society, which need to be weighed against the potential risks or discomfort to participants.

Role of the researcher

It is the researcher's responsibility in any research to protect participants' physical and psychological welfare. At no time must a researcher conduct a study that causes severe distress to participants. If a participant does encounter unexpected distress, the researcher must immediately stop the experiment and provide the participant with access to counselling. The experimenter must also ensure that they act professionally and with integrity at all times, being fair and just toward all participants.

Participants' rights

As well as protecting the welfare of all participants, the researcher must respect the rights of the individual participant. To do this, the researcher should adhere to any relevant ethical guidelines, and to current National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines. There are six main principles when considering a participant's rights.

Confidentiality is a participant's right to privacy in terms of access, storage and disposal of information collected about them that is related to research. A participant's involvement in an experiment cannot be disclosed to anyone else unless written consent has been obtained.

Voluntary participation ensures that a participant willingly decides to take part in an experiment. Participants must not experience any pressure or coercion to participate, nor be threatened with any negative consequences if they decide not to participate in the experiment.

Withdrawal rights refers to the right of the participant to cease their participation in a study at any time without negative consequences or pressure to continue. This guideline must be adhered to during an experiment and also after an experiment; if a person feels uncomfortable during any follow-up activities they are involved in, or wishes to remove their results from being used in the study, withdrawal rights ensure that they can do this.

Informed consent needs to be obtained before an experiment commences. The researcher must obtain written, informed permission from each participant in the study, stating that they consent to participating in the study and have been informed of all necessary information. If a participant is under the age of 18, or is legally unable to give consent, the participant's parent or guardian should complete the consent form. The consent form must inform the participants about their rights, as well as any possible physical or psychological harm that may be encountered during the experiment. Where it is possible and reasonable, participants must be informed about the research procedures employed in the study.

Deception in research should not occur unless it is necessary. It is used in some cases where giving participants information about an experiment beforehand might influence their behaviour during the study and thus affect the accuracy of results. However, deception in research must be used with caution and, when it is used, researchers must ensure that all participants are thoroughly debriefed.

Debriefing is where participants are informed of the study's true purpose once the experiment has ended. During debriefing, a researcher must also correct any mistaken attitudes or beliefs held by the participants, and explain all deception related to the conducting of the experiment. The experimenter must also provide an opportunity for the participants to gain access to information about the study, including procedures, results and conclusions, and provide access to additional support through counselling, as required.
Check your understanding

A university lecturer has been asked to conduct research investigating how mild pain affects memory formation. She decides to use students from her tutorial class. She separates the students into two groups. She shows students in Group A a list of 20 words and then gives them two minutes to recall as many of the words as possible. She shows students in Group B the same list of 20 words, administers a mild electric shock to them, then gives them two minutes to recall as many of the words as possible.

1. What are two major issues that an ethics committee may have with this research? Explain why they are areas of concern.

2. Explain how you would address each of the following ethical guidelines if you were conducting this research.
   a. Voluntary participation
   b. Informed consent
   c. Deception
   d. Withdrawal rights
   e. Debriefing
   f. Confidentiality

3. List some famous psychological experiments that have been conducted in the past that you would consider to be unethical by today's standards. Explain why you would consider them unethical.