



## Ethical Guidelines

This **Psychology Factsheet** is about ethical guidelines in psychology. It includes Exam Hints and the worksheet gives you the opportunity to apply what you have learned to exam style questions. Words in bold are explained in the glossary and a reference list is included at the end to encourage further reading.

### The examiner will expect you to be able to:

- Demonstrate your knowledge of ethical guidelines.
- Identify ethical considerations in research studies.
- Show an understanding of the underlying principles of ethics.
- Show an understanding of changes in ethical considerations over time and contexts.

**Exam Hint:** Candidates who have a good understanding of ethical guidelines will gain basic marks in exams. In order to access higher band marks, you should be able to apply your knowledge to research studies.

### Introduction



**The British Psychological Society**  
Promoting excellence in psychology

The **British Psychological Society (BPS)** is the representative body for psychology in the UK. It sets high standards for education, research and knowledge within the field of psychology, as well as standards for sharing this with the wider public. Underpinning these standards are guidelines for ethical practice in the teaching and application of psychology. These guidelines include: *Code of Ethics and Conduct*, *Practice Guidelines*, *Code of Human Research Ethics* and *Guidance on Teaching and Assessment of Ethical Competence in Psychology Education*.

The **BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018)** is designed to guide psychologists in their day-to-day professional conduct. It focusses on four main ethical principles:

- Respect.
- Competence.
- Responsibility.
- Integrity.



The **BPS Practice Guidelines (2017)** provides a set of shared guidelines for psychologists. It has five main aims:

- To define good psychological practice for all psychologists.
- To strengthen the identity of psychologists.
- To benefit the public.
- To benefit members.
- To provide guidance on legal and regulatory issues.

The **BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014)** sets out the general principles which cover all research with human participants in different contexts. It clarifies the conditions for psychological research involving humans and informs the professional and ethical judgement of researchers. It includes:

- Informed consent.
- Confidentiality.
- Protection from harm.
- Right to withdraw.
- Deception.
- Debriefing.

The **BPS Guidance on Teaching and Assessment of Ethical Competence in Psychology Education (2015)** provides a framework for teaching and assessing ethical competence in psychology. The aim of this guidance is:

- To enable appropriate ethical knowledge and practice at all levels of study in psychology.
- To provide guidance that cultivates an ethical mindset in psychology students.
- To provide practical resources to aid in the teaching of ethics.

BPS ethical guidance is based on the four component model (**Rest, 1982**) which identifies the sequence of thoughts and actions which result in ethical behaviour. These are:

- Ethical sensitivity.
- Ethical reasoning.
- Ethical motivation.
- Ethical implementation.

A-level psychology requires an understanding of the underlying principles of ethics and conduct. The BPS states that the study of ethics in psychology should include:

Knowledge of ethical guidelines (e.g. BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct and Code of Research Ethics).

An understanding of changes in ethical considerations over time and contexts.

- An ability to identify ethical considerations.
- An ability to provide a rationale for ethical decisions.
- Recognition of equality and diversity issues.

**Exam Hint:** The examiners will not expect you to remember the names and dates of publication of the ethical guidelines, but they will expect you to demonstrate an understanding of their significance to psychology and the wider world.

## Four component model



James Rest was a cognitive-developmental psychologist who suggested that ethical behaviour is based on four steps of moral development that lead to ethical action.

Ethical guidance is based on the four component model (**Rest, 1982**) which identifies the sequence of thoughts and actions which result in ethical behaviour.

These are:

- **Ethical sensitivity:** the ability to acknowledge that our own actions affect other people and to consider the impact of our actions on others.
- **Ethical reasoning:** a decision must be made about which course of action is most justifiable, providing the best outcomes for the most people.
- **Ethical motivation:** once a decision has been made about the best course of action, psychologists must be motivated to follow through with ethical behaviour.

**Ethical implementation:** psychologists should be aware of external pressures or biases that might influence their ability to put ethical intentions into action.

**Exam Hint:** Exam boards do not require you to discuss the four-component model in detail, but it will help to inform your answers if you understand its influence on ethical guidelines.

## Code of ethics and conduct



The **BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018)** has four main ethical principles.

### 1) Respect

Psychologists recognise and respect all individuals regardless of differences in social status, ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics. They also respect privacy and confidentiality and the importance of empathy and tolerance.

### 2) Competence

Psychologists work within their area of knowledge, skills, training and experience. They value the importance of continued professional development (CPD) to maintain their skills and acknowledge ongoing advances in psychology.

### 3) Responsibility

Psychologists accept responsibility for their actions and acknowledge that they work with autonomy. They are responsible to research participants, the public and the profession. Psychologists are responsible for avoiding harm and the misuse or abuse of their role.

### 4) Integrity

Psychologists are honest, truthful, accurate and consistent. They are objective and unbiased. They avoid exploitation and conflicts of interest and maintain personal and professional boundaries.

**Exam Hint:** Think of a piece of psychological research you are familiar with and explore the ways in which the four main ethical principles were applied (or perhaps not applied).



## Code of human research ethics



Psychological researchers have a responsibility to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of their work at every stage. Sometimes this is less straightforward than other times and psychologists may find themselves considering the costs to the individual participant versus potential benefits to the wider population. This is sometimes known as a cost-benefit analysis. For example, a researcher might have to weigh up the cost of deceiving their participant in order to potentially discover something useful about human behaviour. There are six main ethical principles to consider in psychological research. These are: informed consent, protection from harm, right to withdraw, confidentiality, debriefing and deception.

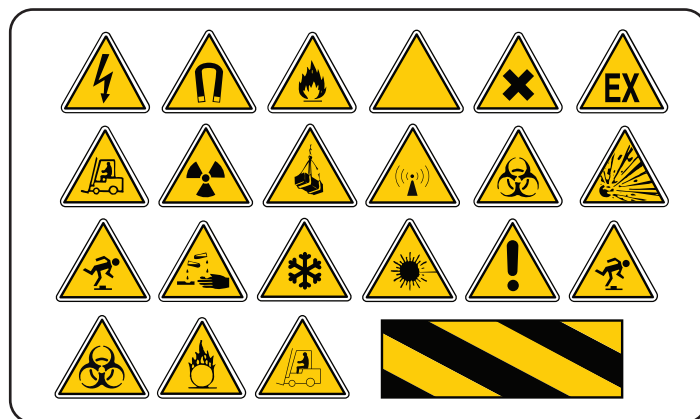
### Informed consent



Participants who take part in psychological research must agree (consent) to do so. In order for them to fully consent, they need to know exactly what they are agreeing to and how their data will be used (i.e. be informed). They should also be informed of any potential risks or negative consequences. It is generally agreed that children under the age of 16 and vulnerable adults cannot give fully informed consent, and this should be obtained from an appropriate adult on their behalf. Consent is usually recorded in a written or electronic consent form which includes the following information:

- Aim of the research.
- Confidentiality and anonymity statement.
- Type and method of data collection.
- Time commitment.
- Right to withdraw from the research and/or withdraw data.
- Potential risks.
- How the data will be used and potential benefits of the research.

## Protection from harm



According to ethical guidance, participants must not suffer physical harm when they take part in research. They must also not be exposed to psychological harm and should leave the research in the same psychological state as when they arrived. In some research, there will be a level of risk, but this should be no greater than that which participants would encounter in their day-to-day life. Psychologists need to be sensitive to the potential impact of research, such as feelings of stress or self-doubt. These risks should be outlined at the start of the research (as part of gaining informed consent) and addressed afterwards in the debrief. Research that may be considered as containing an element of psychological risk is that which involves sensitive topics such as sexual, legal or political behaviour or experiences of crime. These types of research may cause stress or anxiety for some participants.

### Right to withdraw

Participants should be informed that they are free to withdraw consent and leave the research study at any time. They should also be informed that following participation, they have the right to withdraw their data and for it to be destroyed.



#### 1) Confidentiality

All information obtained from and about a participant remains confidential. Any data that is published as a result of the research should not identify individual participants.

#### 2) Deception

Sometimes, an element of deception is necessary in order to carry out psychological research. For example, if Milgram had told his participants the truth; that they were not *actually* administering electric shocks to the confederate, it would have been impossible to test his hypothesis. There is a difference though between withholding some of the details of the hypothesis and deliberately deceiving participants. Ethical guidelines state that psychologists should provide as much information as possible to participants, recognising that providing all of that information at the start of a research study may not be possible for methodological reasons.





Observational studies in natural settings must respect the privacy and psychological wellbeing of those observed. Observational research where participants have not given consent is only permissible in situations where people would expect to be observed by members of the public.

#### 4) Debriefing



It is important that participants leave the research experience in the same physical and psychological state in which they arrived. For this reason, psychologists conduct a debrief session in order to check-in with their participants and make sure they are OK. A debrief also provides an opportunity to remind participants of how their data will be used and stored, as well as their right to withdraw data. A debrief is particularly important if deception or withholding of information has taken place during the research and this is the time to explain the true nature of the hypothesis in full. If there is an identified risk, such as psychological stress or anxiety arising from the research, the psychologist may also use the debrief to provide participants with details of support, such as counselling.

**Exam Hint:** There is considerable overlap between the different ethical guidelines, for example between informed consent and right to withdraw, or between protection from harm and debriefing. In order to maximise your marks in exams, practice applying the different guidelines to specific pieces of research you are familiar with.

### Glossary

**Autonomy:** free will, responsible for own actions and behaviours

**British Psychological Society (BPS):** representative body that sets standards for ethical practice in the education and application of psychology in the UK

**Confidentiality:** it is the duty of psychologists to protect all information obtained from or about their participants

**Competence:** ethical principle which states that psychologists work within their area of knowledge, skills, training and experience

**Cost-benefit:** weighing up the costs to the individual versus potential benefits to them or to the wider population

**Debriefing:** an opportunity to check-in with participants, remind them of their rights and make sure they have suffered no harm

**Deception:** withholding information, for example about the true nature of the hypothesis

**Ethical principles:** respect, competence, responsibility and integrity

**Four-component model:** Rest's hypothesis that ethical behaviour is based on four steps of moral development

**Informed consent:** agreement to take part in research based on knowledge about what participation would involve

**Right to withdraw:** the right of participants to pull-out of the research or withdraw their data at any time

**Integrity:** ethical principle that encompasses honesty, consistency and objectivity

**Protection from harm:** psychologists have a duty to ensure that participants are not harmed physically or psychologically by taking part in research

**Respect:** ethical principle which states that psychologists recognise and respect all individuals regardless of difference

**Responsibility:** ethical principle which states that psychologists accept responsibility for their actions and work with autonomy

### References

- **BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018)** <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-ethics-and-conduct>
- **BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2nd edition, 2014)** <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-human-research-ethics-2nd-edition-2014>
- **BPS Guidance on Teaching and Assessment of Ethical Competence in Psychology Education (2015)** <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Guidance%20on%20Teaching%20and%20Assessment%20of%20Ethical%20Competence%20in%20Psychology%20Education%20%282015%29.pdf>
- **BPS Practice Guidelines (2017)** <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/practice-guidelines>
- **Rest, J. R. (1982)** *Morality*. In Carmichael's Manual of Child Psychology, Volume on Cognitive Development, edited by J. Flavell, and E. Markman. 4th ed., 556–629. New York: Wiley.

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## Worksheet: Ethical Guidelines

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Outline the four main ethical principles with reference to one piece of social psychological research (e.g. Milgram, Zimbardo).

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2. Explain what is meant by informed consent. Give one example of psychological research where this was obtained and one example of psychological research where it was not obtained.

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3. Explain why Milgram believed that it was necessary to deceive participants about the true nature of his study and explain how this could have been addressed.

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4. Outline the ways in which the four component model has influenced ethical guidelines.

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5. Design a consent form for a piece of psychological research you are familiar with.

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