

# Ethics in Psychological Research

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the ethics involved in performing research in the field of psychology. You will consider how strong problem solving and self and social awareness skills impact both how researchers plan their research and how those participating make informed decisions. The specific areas of focus include:

## 1. Ethics in Psychological Experiments

As with other sciences, psychology has a history of some untrustworthy and unethical research, which has made the presence of a solidified ethical code for research very important.

You can better understand the role of **ethics** by considering the psychological and physical stressors that research participants experience. Ethical decision-making combines aspects of both the **self and social awareness skill** and the **problem solving skill**. Psychological researchers must be strong in both skills to ensure ethical considerations are at the heart of their research design.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Ethics

An outline of behavior that is morally right or wrong.

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## 2. APA Professional Code of Conduct Guidelines

When it comes to ethics, the **APA Professional Code of Conduct for Psychologists** is generally considered to be the set of rules for psychological experimentation and psychotherapy.

The APA Professional Code of Conduct for Psychologists outlines what researchers and psychotherapists can and can't do.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### APA Professional Code of Conduct for Psychologists

A professional code developed by the American Psychological Association to guide both researchers and therapists.

## 2a. Importance of Competence

The first guideline in the Code of Conduct is the importance of competence in psychologists, which applies to both psychotherapy and research. This means that the psychologist should understand what he or she is researching, and what the effects of that research might be.

This need for competence coincides with the licensing requirements for a lot of psychology jobs, as many professions in psychology, even counseling professions, still require a state or national certificate. These could be qualifications such as private licenses, or a masters degree. Many clinical practices require psychologists to have some form of a doctorate, either a PhD or a PsyD.

## 2b. Importance of Informed Consent

The second point to know under the Code of Conduct is the importance of informed consent, which means that the participants in the research or experiment have to give consent to receive any kind of treatment. Experiments cannot be performed on people without their consent, which hasn't always been the case.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the past, prisoners have been used in medical experiments, in psychology and other scientific fields, without their explicit consent. The fact that they were prisoners was considered enough of a reason for some scientists to conduct research on them.

## 2c. Importance of Confidentiality

A third point is the importance of confidentiality in both therapy and research. The privacy of the patients, clients, and subjects should be maintained at all times.

Psychologists cannot share this information with other people or with the general public. This is especially important in therapy when trying to create a connection with the patient. If the patient knows the information isn't going anywhere, then he or she is more likely to trust the psychologist who's dealing with it.

## 2d. Importance of Voluntary Participation

The final two points we'll discuss apply specifically to research in psychology.

The first of these is the importance of voluntary participation in an experiment, meaning that the subjects know beforehand exactly what they're getting into. In other words, they must be given the chance to use their **problem solving skill** to make an informed decision.

This goes along with informed consent, as voluntary participation also means the subjects agree to what they're going to do. They should understand exactly what the task will be, and most importantly, they should be debriefed after they're finished with the experiment and told exactly what was being studied, how it was being studied, and why.

Sometimes deception is used as part of the experiment, meaning that the subjects are told beforehand that something different is being studied. This may help avoid the observer bias that we learned about in the last lesson. However, this incorrect information is only given when it's absolutely necessary for the experiment.

## 2e. Importance of Avoiding Harm

Finally, in that same vein, researchers should avoid inflicting any kind of physical or psychological harm on the subjects as much as possible. A subject should never be exploited or harassed in any way.

Sometimes there might be a need to introduce some small stress or physical harm, but it should be minimal

(and preferably nonexistent) in any psychological experiment.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **ethics in psychological experiments** and research. Like many sciences, psychology has somewhat of a history with dubious or unethical research methods, which is why having an ethical code is so important today. Strong problem solving and self and social awareness skills can help researchers plan ethical experiments or studies.

You now understand that the **APA Code of Conduct** is considered to be the governing set of rules for psychologists in both research and clinical fields (though some rules apply to research and experimentation specifically). Five of the most important APA Code of Conduct guidelines are the **importance of competence**, the **importance of informed consent**, the **importance of confidentiality**, the **importance of voluntary participation**, and the **importance of avoiding harm**. Strong problem solving skills can help participants decide if taking part in any given study is a good choice for them.

Good luck!

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### **Ethics**

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