

# The importance of ethical issues in psychology



Ethical issues in psychology became increasingly important in the last part of twentieth century, and are now firmly established as a significant part of modern psychology. They do not only feature as an area of study in their own right, but all psychological research is increasingly under scrutiny with regard to its ethical implications. Studies which were previously considered as acceptable are no longer regarded to be so. Some may ask ' Why? What influenced this change?' It is assumed that the Nuremberg Code establishment, unethical psychological research from the past century as well as the development of newer ethical principles, have impacted on changes in social and cultural values that discarded them from being acceptable.

Therefore, the aim of this essay is to argue for the statement assuming that " the evolution of ethical principles and practice in psychology reflects changes in social and cultural values over the past century".

Firstly, socio-cultural changes from the past century will be outlined.

Secondly, examples of unethical experiments from the past century will be mentioned. Thirdly, the impact of socio-cultural changes changes in social and cultural values over the past century and their impact on today's points of view will be mentioned (evaluated). Thirdly, ethical dilemmas that still psychologists face today will be examined. And finally (?)

Ethics and ethical principles reach to all aspects of human activities (Khididr & Elnimeiri, 2008). The basic principles of research ethics are nowadays firmly established. However, it was not always so. Many researchers from the past centuries conducted studies on patients without their consent and with

little, and often even without concern for their well-being. Even though there were some instructions for ethical research dating from the early 20th century, they did not prevent scientists in Nazi Germany from conducting studies on 'subjects' that clearly violated fundamental human rights. Following World War Two, some of these scientists were trialled and convicted at Nuremberg in Germany. The basis of the judgment is known as the Nuremberg Code, which has served as one of the foundational documents of modern research ethics. The requirement of voluntary consent was among ten principles of this Code, if a participant was to serve as a research subject (Khidir & Elnimeiri, 2008).

But the developing recognition of the importance of an ethical approach came not only with the establishment of the Nuremberg Code; there were also other factors that have contributed to the beginning of the ethics debate.

According to Hayes (2002) the youth-culture 'peace and love' value system of the 1960s arising in response to the increasing threat to civil liberties through tougher legislation has probably had an impact on the development of debate about ethical issues. An increasing acknowledgement that people have their rights which should be respected has arrived. The 1960s was a decade when, influenced by African Americans' protests, almost every other American minority group (but not only) began to demand equal rights. Native Americans, migrants, homosexuals, and feminists believed that they should be guaranteed equal rights in housing, employment, and other areas. The increasing support for the social responsibility (theory which prescribes that individuals should help other people who are dependent on their help; <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-ethical-issues-in-psychology/>

Hewstone et al., 2008) during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the impact of the humanistic school, which emphasized the human being and denied participants serving as 'subjects' in psychological research to be thinking and autonomous individuals rather than inanimate lumps of matter, has also had an enormous impact on the development of ethics debate (Hayes, 2002, p. ).

Another source of ethical interest originated from the psychological studies itself. And even though the concept of informed consent and the absence of coercion became known after the establishment of the Nuremberg Code in 1947, the later forms of investigation within psychology involved a highly manipulative mind-set, in which the " experimenter pulled the strings and the 'subjects' ideally danced" (Hayes, 2002, p. 47). This manipulative practice certainly reflected lack of respect for research participants, and unfortunately was demonstrated in a number of studies from the past century.

One which illustrates it quite clearly was the well-known library study of Felipe and Sommer (1966). This study involved deliberate invasion on the personal space of library users; researcher was sitting extremely close to 'subjects' (who did not know they are 'taking part' in the study), and timing how long it took before they packed up and moved away. Even though the study was not harmful, many of the library users understandably became irritated. It was not considered that these people have a right to carry on with their tasks in peace. However, it was assumed, by researchers that they have the right to disrupt other people without any consideration for their

rights as individuals. Therefore, this study clearly illustrates the lack of respect for subjects which was common in the old experimental paradigm.

Another research practice which was common in the psychological literature but which has become less acceptable now is that of deception (Hayes, 2002). Deception was a routine aspect of psychological research and it became so much accepted that there are many examples that could be given. One of them is the study conducted by Jones and Sigall (1971); Jones and Sigall (1971) employed the 'bogus pipeline' technique to measure attitudes. 'Subjects' were convinced that a physiological measurement apparatus was capable of recording their genuine attitudes and opinions; however, in reality, the 'bogus pipeline' technique was thought to invoke a motivation in 'subjects' to offer more true self-reports. And again, this methodology maybe was not likely to cause in participants deep psychological damage, however it did involve deliberate deception (Hayes, 2002). Therefore, this example again reveals the old school psychology's disrespect towards its subjects.

However, there are many more examples of research studies in psychology which had more potentially serious outcomes.

One of the most dramatic examples is well known Milgram's (1974) research study of obedience to authority. In his study, participants were explained that a teacher-learner scenario will be used, and participants were led to believe that roles had been determined by chance. In fact, the 'learner' was an experimental confederate, whereas the 'teacher' (participant), by means of a simulated shock generator, was to deliver increasingly more intense

electric shocks to the 'learner' every time he made a mistake on the learning task. In fact, no shocks were delivered, but the impact of the experimental scenario was so high that all participants believed that they were shocking the 'learner' what induced high levels of psychological distress in participants (Milgram, 1974).

Milgram (1974) in defence of his obedience experiment reported that all participants received a comprehensive report when the experiments were over, detailing the procedure and the results, as a follow-up questionnaire concerning their participation, which was a part of debriefing. Of the 92 per cent who returned the questionnaires the vast majority reported that they were glad or very glad to have participated. Because such a high number of participants asserted that Milgram's procedure was acceptable, researcher could easily justify himself for allowing this sort of procedure in his experiment (Milgram, 1974). However, according to Hayes (2002) such an outcome could not have been predicted and even if everything finished all right, taking risks with people's well-being became not acceptable professional practice nowadays.

There are even more dramatic examples of unethical practice in psychological research but concerning children – Watson and Rayner's (1920) study of little Albert, for example. Nine-month old Albert was an indifferent child, who had never been known to get upset over anything; therefore he was intentionally subjected to all sorts of unpleasant experiences designed to induce terror. Watson and Rayner (1920) never actually managed to recondition little Albert as he was removed from the hospital by his mother before they had a chance. It could be said that not <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-ethical-issues-in-psychology/>

before time, as little Albert became nervous, jumpy and easily upset. It is not known, whether his mother stopped trusting in the integrity of the researchers, after eighteen days of Albert being exposed to increasingly distressing stimuli. But this aspect of the study went largely uncommented on for many decades.

Many of the ethical issues arose from animal experimentation which in psychology has had a long history. In 1960s so much of psychology rested on animal experimentation that issues of animal rights and cruelty received little consideration (Hayes, 2002). Many scientists assumed that since some studies could not be done without harming participants, the only concept was to use animals instead of people. The idea that researcher might not wish to conduct a study received scant attention from the scientific establishment in general. As Hayes (2002) indicated " at that time, it was considered to be self-evident that the acquisition of scientific knowledge was a goal in itself, regardless of the cost" (p. 54). Hayes (2002) gave an example of Lucy, a chimpanzee, who was brought up with human beings and taught a sign language. When she grew too large, she was transferred to live in a colony of wild chimpanzees. When a visitor she recognized came to visit the colony, Lucy signed desperately: ' Please help. Out'. Rearing a chimpanzee in a loving, enriched environment and then sending it into completely different environment is cruel and unethical; unfortunately this aspect of the research was ignored at that time.

As mentioned before, the establishment of the Nuremberg Code, the youth-culture ' peace and love' value system of the 1960s, the human rights movements, the increasing support for the social responsibility during the

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1970s, the impact of the humanistic school as well as the research studies where manipulation, deception or lack of respect towards ' subjects', either human and non-human were regarded as normal, all these factors have contributed to the development of the ethics debate. And as the world has started changing, psychology as a discipline had to change as well. With all these changes people's awareness of methodology has changed also.

Nowadays, most of the students learn about the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy and the need to avoid experimenter expectations affecting the outcome of an experiment (Hayes, 2002). According to Pettifor (1996) the study of social behaviour has become more likely to be conducted in the context of natural and cultural surroundings, making use of observation and advanced correlational methods. These methodological changes seem to be regarded as more respectful towards participants and more applicable to the pursuit of knowledge (Pettifor, 1996). The evolution of ethical principles and changes in social and cultural values that were growing at the same time, both have certainly impacted on each other. Nowadays, it would not be possible to conduct a research study of little Albert. There is a number of policies, established in the past century, that aim to protect children, who for decades did not have a voice; one of them is The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Over 20 years ago, world leaders decided that children need a special convention just for them because people under 18 years old often need special care and protection that adults do not.

Moreover, the leaders also wanted to make sure that the world recognized that children have human rights too and their voice has to be taken into account (UNICEF). To protect children taking part in the research, Ethical Standards for Research with Children has been established by The Society

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for Research in Child Development (SRCD, 2007). These ethical principles aim to prevent researchers from conducting studies similar to that one of little Albert (Watson & Rayner, 1920), where a nine month old child was exposed to distressing stimuli which had a negative impact on his further well-being. It is difficult to predict what would happen without the establishment of the first ethical code, which initiated the role of the individual as a 'human being' with feelings and his own rights; it is possible, however, that children would be treated in similar way that they were treated in the past century.

Nowadays, it would not be also possible to conduct an experimental study such as the one with Lucy the chimpanzee, mentioned above. Animal learning experiments, very popular in 1960s and 1970s have fortunately largely disappeared today, due to the anti-animal research arguments and manifestations about the social responsibility of science in the 1970s and 1980s. Animal rights campaigns were organized to protest against needlessly cruel and often trivial animal experimentation. Ethical guidelines for animals, such as Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in the Care and Use of Animals (APA, 1996), have been established; thus, nowadays ethical guidelines on animal research are implemented and strongly supported by the law. Scientists are cautioned not to cause animals' pain or distress, and serious reason must be given for conducting a research. Moreover, only qualified laboratory personnel are allowed to conduct a research with animals (Hayes, 2002). Therefore, the evolution of ethical principles has changed also people's views about animals, which nowadays ought to be treated with the same respect as human beings.

In Milgram's (1974), Felipe and Sommer's (1966) or Jones and Sigall's (1971) studies, as well as in many more psychological studies not mentioned above, it was evident that research participants had been objects of manipulative and deceptive practices to suit the researcher's purposes. Questionable research procedures were usually justified in terms of potential long term benefits to society (Dunbar, 1992, as in cited in Pettifor, 1996). This psychological practice has started developing in people the importance of individual's personal autonomy and choice. A new awareness of ethical responsibility has started coming to psychology. As a result separate guidelines for ethical conduct with children, animals, as well as with adult participants have been established. One of them was BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2006) which highlights procedures for conducting research with human beings and professional practice. Psychologists as well as students are obliged to follow four significant rules: respect, competence, responsibility, integrity. All psychologists have to be aware that following these principles builds up such an important respect towards participants.

As mentioned before, along with the evolution of ethical principles, social and cultural values have started to change, and with these changes, attitudes towards every being, whether it was a child, adult or non-human being, has started to alter. Human rights movements have highlighted issues of equity; gay people and feminists have started movements to fight for their rights; homosexuality viewed as mental illness, was unacceptable by the majority of society (Morgan & Nerison, 1993). In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, finally suggesting that homosexuality may be an acceptable form

of human sexual expression (as cited in Morgan & Nerison, 1993). Even though, heterosexual bias was seen – people valued heterosexuality as superior to and/or more “ natural” than homosexuality (Morin, 1977) – minorities issues of human rights have been highlighted by APA’s action. It was a huge step ahead for gay people at this time. In 1984, Division 44 of the American Psychological Association, the Society for the Psychological Study of Gay and Lesbian Issues, was formed (as cited in Morgan & Nerison, 1993). This society and similar other groups have worked with a real effort toward advancing the civil rights of gay males and lesbian women (Morgan & Nerison, 1993). Since then, many things have changed in terms of attitudes towards homosexual people. According to Gallup trends, by the late 1990s public attitudes toward homosexuals had advanced considerably compared with the 1970s, and even with the early 1990s. “ The percentage saying homosexuals should have equal job opportunities grew from 56% in 1977 to 74% in 1992 and to 88% by 2003. Similarly, the percentage saying homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle was only 34% in 1982 and 38% in 1992, but expanded to 50% by 1999” (Saad, 2005, p. 1). These statistics clearly indicate how the status of this topic has evolved, as well as how the social and cultural values have changed over the years. And it is clear that the way the ethical principles have evolved had an impact on current opinions.

It does look quite similar in terms of mental illness. Mental patients have for years been regarded with more distaste and less sympathy than virtually any other disabled group, and in fact their handicaps were partly attributable to public attitudes of rejection and avoidance in 1970s (Rabkin, 1974).

Rosenhan (1973) demonstrated that diagnostic labels change perceptions of the person; researcher has also shown how 'labels' affect the way in which people are treated. Being an ex-mental-patient was more of a problem than being an ex-criminal in the pursuit of housing, jobs, and friends in 1960s and 1970s. This unequal treatment and the gross inhumanity of involuntary psychiatric hospitalization, led mental hygiene movements to fight for the rights of mentally ill people. In the 1991 Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and for the Improvement of Mental Health Care were adopted by the United Nations which focuses mainly on human rights in relation to the mental health system. This document emphasize that " every person with mental illness has the same rights as every other person, has the right to live and work, as far as possible, in the community; and people being treated for a mental illness must be accorded the right to recognition as a person before the law" (United Nations General Assembly, 1991).

Moreover, the 1978 Report of the National Commission on the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research (the Belmont Report) produced principles for guiding ethical research with mentally ill participants: beneficence, respect for persons and justice. These principles formed the basis of the federal regulations governing human research (as cited in APA, 2006).

Although, ethical principles are now well established, psychologists still face dilemmas today. In Pope's (1992) study, nearly 700 of American Psychological Society members reported incidents that they found ethically challenging or troubling. The most often reported dilemmas encompassed confidentiality. Of these troubling or challenging incidents, actual or potential

risks to third parties were reported in most cases. Quite a large number involved also child abuse reporting, some included individuals infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or suffering from acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), whereas some included patients who threatened or had committed violence. According to Pope (1992) it is not surprising that confidentiality is the most frequently reported ethical dilemma reported by the members of the society, as in accordance to national studies of psychologists the most often intentional violations of ethical principles involved confidentiality (Pope & Bajt, 1988; as cited in Pope, 1992). However, in some cases psychologist may has to violate this significant principle, otherwise it can come to tragedy, as it happened in the Tarasoff's case - a man called Poddar was convinced of manslaughter in the death of Tatiana Tarasoff. The court ruled that his therapist, who had become convinced Poddar might harm Tarasoff, should have warned her of the impending danger (Kring et al., 2010). Therefore, even though in some research confidentiality has been declared by psychologists as the most important ethical duty (Crowe et al., 1985; as cited in Pope, 1992), in situations similar to the one mentioned above, psychologists, even if they do not wish to, are forced to violate this principle.

Another ethical dilemma psychologists may face nowadays is that of informed consent - a core component of ethical research. A central issue is that potential participants must be able to understand the study and associated risks. However, the problem appears when vulnerable people, such as children or mentally ill people are going to be prospective participants (Kring et al., 2010). Researchers must understand that such

participants may be unable to understand fully what is being asked.

Therefore, researchers must also ascertain that participants are not having trouble understanding the study. Irvin et al. (1985; as cited in Kring et al., 2010) based on their study concluded, that reading information to mentally ill patients (especially to the more severely ill ones) does not guarantee that they will fully comprehend. Thus, informed consent cannot be said to have been obtained.

Another ethical dilemma psychologists/researchers face today may involve research area. Psychologists are obliged to protect the welfare of individual (BPS, 2006) as well as they are under obligation to carry out socially meaningful research (particularly social psychologists) that may improve the quality of people's lives. However they face a dilemma when this general ethical responsibility to society comes into conflict with their more specific ethical responsibility to each individual experimental participant. As, for example, in terms of intimate relationships, which can be most glorious pleasure human beings experience as well as a source of suffering and destructiveness; while investigating, for instance jealousy between partners, researchers must think carefully about how this research might affect the couple participating in such a study (Gross, 2009).

Ethical issues are now firmly established as a significant part of modern psychology. However, the research from the past century indicates that it was not always so. The establishment of the Nuremberg Code, the youth-culture 'peace and love' value system of the 1960s, the human rights movements, the increasing support for the social responsibility during the 1970s, the impact of the humanistic school as well as research studies where

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the lack of respect towards participants was evident and deception was used for the aim of 'human betterment', all these factors have contributed to the development of the ethics debate.

Although, actions from the past century that took place in some countries changed social and cultural values, bringing an emphasis on individual's personal autonomy and choice, unfortunately there are still many countries where breaches of human rights notoriously occur and the development of the ethics debate does not seem to begin.

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