

Ethical Issues in Psychological Research



This activity will help you to:

- Discuss the ethical issues raised by different psychological studies
- Perform an ethical cost benefit analysis of different psychological studies
- Consider different ethical stances a psychologist might take
- Assess the implications of different ethical stances

Activity 1

Below are brief accounts of a number of psychological studies that raise ethical issues. Working in small groups, you need to discuss the ethical issues raised by one of the studies. You should do this in terms of a **cost-benefit analysis** where:

- **Costs** are the negative impact of the study on the participants who took part. In which ways were they affected, and how badly?
- **Benefits** are the positive outcomes of the study in terms of its impact on (a) the participants, (b) psychology and (c) society more generally.

You should make a note of the costs and the benefits, and try to make an assessment of whether the study was **justified** in that the benefits outweigh the costs. We will then discuss your ideas as a group.

- **Milgram (1963)** carried out research into obedience to authority. In the course of his research, pps were tricked into believing that they had given lethal electric shocks to a stranger. Milgram used his findings to argue that obedience is a consequence of social pressure rather than a personality defect.
- **Zimbardo (1973)** carried out research into the impact of social roles on behaviour. In his study, pps played the roles of prisoners and guards. The guards became aggressive and brutal, whilst the prisoners became passive and neurotic. Zimbardo concluded that evil acts are more the consequence of social roles and environments than of evil people.
- **Humphreys (1970)** carried out research into the practices and social interactions of gay men meeting up in a public toilet for sex. He posed as a gay man and met with and talked to his participants. To find out more about his participants' backgrounds, he took their car number plates and used a contact in the police to find out where they lived. Humphreys concluded that most of the stereotypes about gay men were untrue and that their public sexual practices were not harmful to anyone.

Activity 2

Working in pairs or small groups, discuss and prepare a response to each of the following statements. You can agree or disagree, but you must be able to defend your point of view.

- **“People are more important than research. Any research practice that has a negative impact on those taking part is simply unacceptable and must be disallowed.”**
- **“Cost-benefit analysis is a misguided attempt to justify ethical violations, since it tries to play the real suffering of real people against a theoretical benefit to a notional wider society.”**
- **“You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.”**