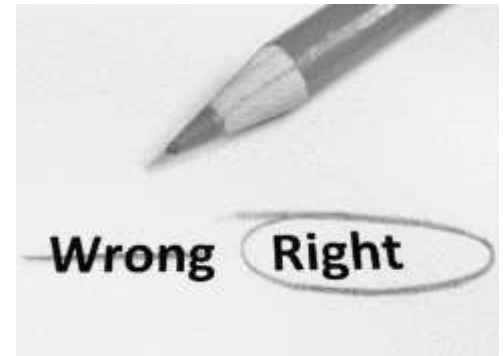


Controversies in Psychology: Ethical Costs of Conducting Research (pg 162-163)

What I will need to know:

- Be able to describe the issue of ethical costs in psychology
- Evaluate the issue of ethical costs in psychology
- Be able to apply to a novel situation
- Be able to discuss:
 - Benefits to society and the economy
 - Individual participants
 - Potentially negative consequences for society
 - Risk management techniques used by psychologists



Introduction

Throughout your two years studying psychology, the topic of ethics has appeared countless times. Whenever we evaluate a study, we assess the ethical costs to the participants. In C2, you learned about the specific ethical issues that psychologists have to address (**protection from harm, right to withdraw, informed consent, deception, confidentiality and privacy**). Ethics is much more than just what happens to individual participants. The findings of psychological research can have wider social implications. On the one hand, psychology can bring huge benefits for the treatment of mental illness, and a deeper understanding of psychological problems that can lead to a greater level of empathy and understanding. However, psychological research may pose ethical issues about how accountable people are for their actions. Findings can also be used to fuel prejudice and discrimination.

This controversy encompasses all these issues. Not only is it about the ethical costs to individual participants, but it is also about the cost-benefit analysis that occurs in research. Some argue that research outcomes that benefit many people outweigh the costs to individual participants, while others state the opposite; research that harms participants is never justified. However, this is a simplistic view. In reality, both sides agree that there are scientific benefits and ethical costs; the disagreement is about the subjective degree of these benefits and costs.

Brain storm: which studies that you learned about throughout Y12 and Y13 pose ethical issues? This could either be costs to the individual participants, or costs to society.

Brain storm: which studies that you learned about throughout Y12 and Y13 have given benefits to society or the economy?

1. Benefits to society and the economy

What is a “benefit”? This is the benefit in terms of knowledge and understanding gained from scientific research. A benefit could be something that we did not know before or it could be the improvement of existing knowledge. A benefit may also be assessed by the practical gains in terms of improved treatments for illnesses, changes to government policy on the basis of psychological research etc. In terms of society, benefits may be an increased understanding and awareness of an issue, and practical applications. These applications may be direct mental health interventions and treatments, or could be schemes to improve outcomes in education, work or sport for example.

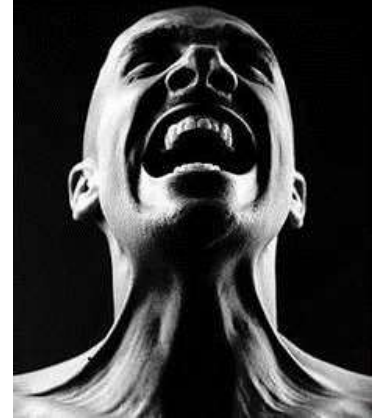
Throughout the two years, you have learned about many ways in which psychology has been applied in the real world. These benefits can be used to support the argument that psychology has been beneficial to the wider world. Think about the approaches from C1. For each, we assessed how **useful** they had been. We could also talk about the benefits to the economy. For each of the methods of modification in C3, we have looked at how this method would bring economic benefits.



In the space below, brainstorm all the benefits to society that have come from psychology.

2. Individual participants

What is an “ethical cost”? This is the cost to the participants in the study. This could be in terms of psychological or physical trauma, a breach of confidentiality or privacy, the use of deception, a lack of a right to withdraw, or the lack of fully informed consent. These costs can be major, or relatively minor. Ethical issues often arise in psychology. According to **Gross (2003)** particular ethical issues are raised in psychological research because humans and animals have feelings and can experience pain, fear and so on. They are sentient thinking beings, and are capable of experiencing emotional as well as physical pain. There is also the issue raised that inducing such feelings in another being can be seen as morally unacceptable. These are issues that do not tend to arise in other sciences.



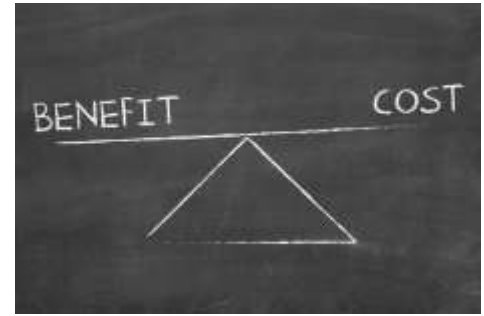
There is always a risk that participants will come to either psychological or physical harm during an experiment. This harm may be great (such as in Zimbardo, Milgram or Watson and Rayner) or might be relatively minor (e.g. Loftus). However, the general guideline is that participants should experience no more psychological or physical risk as they would in everyday life.

In the space below, brainstorm all the studies we have looked at where participants came to harm, or where there were ethical issues.

Weighing up the costs and benefits

On the previous two pages, you have looked at examples of the benefits to society and costs to participants that come from psychological research. Let's take a moment to weigh up these costs and benefits.

The double obligation dilemma: Psychologists have an obligation to two sets of people. Firstly the psychologist has an obligation to the participants. They have to ensure that the participant does not come to any harm as part of the study, and in essence should leave the study in the same state in which they entered. Secondly, the psychologist has an obligation to seek to and share knowledge which will better the human race. The controversy arises when there is a conflict of interest between these two groups of people. The costs to the participants can be seen as the ethical costs while the benefits to the human race would be the scientific benefits.



Scientific benefits: **Milgram** argued that if we excluded any study which created stress or conflict, and only allowed studies that produced positive emotions, we would have a very lopsided view of psychology, one that “caricatured rather than accurately reflected human experience”. Milgram went on to highlight that the most informative experiments in social psychology include those where the participants resolve conflict of some kind (E.g. Milgram's own experiment). If we excluded the study of such core human issues, we would lose a great deal of important scientific information about the study of human behaviour. We could also argue that the unethical methods used in studies, such as deception, are justified as they are the only way to collect valid data.



Ethical costs: On the other hand, we could argue that the costs to participants do not justify the benefits to society. The participant themselves is unlikely to receive any of the benefit from the study, although they receive the bulk of the ethical costs. We could also argue that in some studies, the scientific benefits were not apparent from the outset of the experiment. It is only in retrospect that we see the studies as important. At the time, the participants suffered distress, and probably would have cared little for the scientific benefits. However, we could also argue that the ethical costs were also not apparent at the outset. The researchers did not know that there would be such negative consequences. Ethically, can this be justified?

Pick two or three of the studies discussed on the previous pages. Assess whether or not you feel that the benefits to society were outweighed by the costs to the participants.

3. Potentially negative consequences for society

Previously, we discussed the benefits for society and the economy. While it is not in dispute that psychology has brought many benefits, it is not without its downside. **Socially sensitive research** for example is research where the findings may be used to promote prejudice and discrimination.

Certain areas of psychological investigation may be fraught with the potential to be socially sensitive. For example, research into race, gender and homosexuality may inadvertently fuel racism, sexism and homophobia respectively. In fact, by producing peer reviewed research into such areas, it could be argued to provide “scientific credibility to the prevailing prejudice” (Sieber and Stanley, 1988).

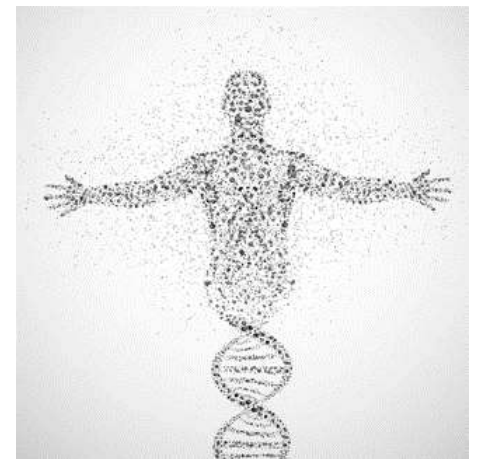


One example of a socially sensitive study is **Blumstein & Schwartz (1983)**. They investigated the number of additional sexual partners in couples together for more than 10 years. They found that 22% of heterosexual wives, 30% of heterosexual husbands, 43% of lesbians, and 94% of gay men reported having sex with at least one person other than their partner.

Explain why the study above may be socially sensitive?

One particular issue that is posed by research (in particular, some of the theories we have looked at this year) is the potential social implications of conducting studies into the biological (including genetic) basis of behaviour. Such theories could be argued to pose ethical issues, particularly with regards to free will and determinism.

If a behaviour such as crime or addiction were found to have a genetic or other biological basis, this could pose potential issues. If there are genes identified for criminal behaviour for example, then what happens to people who are found to carry this gene? On the one hand, identifying the gene may allow psychologists to stage interventions early in life to alter a child's behaviour so that they do not turn to criminal behaviour late in life. On the other hand, this evidence could be misused; could the fact that an individual carries a gene for criminal behaviour be used as evidence against them in court? Another ethical issue, is if behaviour is caused by biological factors such as genes, can we hold people responsible for their actions? Should we punish criminals if their behaviour was caused by physiological forces beyond their control?



When people read about an alleged genetic link to a behaviour, they are apt to conclude that the behaviour is genetic. This leads to a belief that behaviour such as addiction or criminality is the result of genetic makeup—and not of racism, poverty, and other oppressive social conditions—thereby influencing public attitudes toward ethnic groups having a relatively high conviction/incarceration rate. Therefore, such research may be argued to be *socially sensitive*. As certain ethnic groups are more likely to be arrested and imprisoned than others, it may lead to the belief that these groups are genetically inferior.

One extreme consequence of a belief that behaviour is genetic can lead to is the attempt to eradicate certain genes from the population. In the past, it has been official government policy that undesirables such as the mentally ill and criminals were forcibly sterilised so as to prevent them passing their genes on to the next generation. Psychological research into the genetic basis of behaviour may encourage policies that could lead to a resurgence in eugenics.

Another example of an area of psychology that has produced negative outcomes for society is **psychoanalysis**. During the 1990s, there was a rise in the number of people uncovering repressed memories of horrific childhood abuse. Psychologists such as Elizabeth Loftus argued that the evidence suggested that these “memories” were false memories, implanted by the psychoanalyst during therapy. Psychoanalysis (including dream analysis) is based upon ideas from the psychodynamic approach, and makes the assumption that humans have an unconscious mind where traumatic memories are stored. This idea, like many from the psychodynamic approach, is not supported by empirical evidence. However, these concepts are at the heart of psychoanalytic therapy. The uncovering of these repressed “memories” had serious consequences for the families involved.



Can you think of any other areas of psychology where the consequences for society were negative?

However, while the potential for harm may never be completely removed, it could be argued that the potential benefits of research outweigh the harm the findings may cause. **Sieber and Stanley** argue that carrying out such research is a moral obligation of psychologists. If psychologists refused to investigate sensitive issues because they are controversial, they would only ever study unimportant things. However, it could be argued that psychologists need to be proactive in what happens with the findings of their research. If their findings could potentially be used to fuel prejudice, they need to ensure that their conclusions are worded in such a way as to reduce this risk.



What benefits may come from the findings of Blumstein & Schwartz (1983) on the previous page?

4. Risk management techniques used by psychologists

As we have seen, there is huge potential for psychological experiments to cause harm to participants in studies. Therefore, psychologists have a number of ways to reduce the risk their study may cause to a participants.

For each of the following, describe how a psychologist would reduce the potential harm in a study.

Issue	How it can be overcome
Deception	
Risk of Harm	
Valid consent	
Confidentiality	
Privacy	

In order to ensure that their studies maintain the highest ethical standards, any study has to first be assessed by an ethics committee. This is a panel of experts who examine proposals for psychological research and make decisions on whether to allow the study to go ahead. They will weigh up the potential benefits of the study against any potential ethical costs. They may make recommendations to the researcher about improvements that could be made to reduce the ethical risks. If a psychologist were to behave unethically, they may be banned from practicing psychology. Also, any research they do would not be allowed to be published if it was unethical. This is to discourage other psychologists from conducting unethical studies.



The British Psychological Society (BPS) publish guidelines for ethical research. The guidelines are based on the principles of **respect**, **competence**, **responsibility** and **integrity**. The BPS guidelines also gives specific advice on particular research methods (laboratory studies, observation etc). There are also specific guidelines supporting psychologists working with animals.

What are the potential drawbacks of guidelines such as those published by the BPS?

Aronson (1992) suggests that one way of dealing with ethical issues is to use a cost-benefit analysis, weighing up how much good will derive from the research against any potential harm or distress to the participant. However, **Baumrind (1975)** argues that all a cost benefit analysis does is legitimise the use of unethical methods. Another argument against this is that the participants who take part in the psychological experiments (whether human or animal) are generally not the ones who receive the benefit. Therefore, from the point of view of a participant, they have all the ethical costs, but none of the scientific benefit. A counter argument to this however is that the process of taking part in an experiment often means that the participants do benefit in terms of the experience they have, and often they will also learn something about themselves. For example many of Milgram's participants stated that they found the experience to be worthwhile



Many ethical issues arise from the use of laboratory experiments (the most common type of psychological experiment). There are a number of validity issues with the use of lab experiments (ecological validity, demand characteristic etc). Therefore, it may be argued that the results gained are meaningless, and only show us how strangers interact in artificial situations. If we follow this argument through, it would become apparent that the ethical costs cannot be justified as the scientific benefits are unclear.

Conclusion

What conclusions can you come to about this issue? Why should psychologists care about ethics? Can anything be done to make psychology more ethical? Do the benefits of unethical research outweigh the costs?

Exam Practice

1. "The benefits to society do not justify the ethical costs to individual participants in psychological studies." What is your opinion on this quote? Using your knowledge of psychology, justify your answer [25]
 - *This question is testing your AO2 application skills [10]. You can gain AO2 marks from providing evidence and examples to support the points you make, providing good arguments, and using correct terminology.*
 - *It is also testing your AO3 evaluation skills [15]. You can gain AO3 marks by interpreting the evidence, discussing the arguments and evaluating them, and coming to a conclusion.*
 - *There is a large scope to discuss many issues in this essay. However, the quote makes specific reference to **benefits to society** as well as **individual participants**. You need therefore to address both of these issues in your answer.*
 - *You need to come to a conclusion. This means that at the end you need to have provided an answer to the quote given. You may agree, disagree or be sitting on the fence. However, your conclusion should follow logically on from the arguments and evidence you have presented.*

2. "Psychologists are aware of the ethical costs of conducting research, so they use risk management techniques to reduce these costs." Using your knowledge of psychology, discuss issues of ethical cost in psychology, including a discussion of risk management techniques. [25]
 - *This question is testing your AO2 application skills [10]. You can gain AO2 marks from providing evidence and examples to support the points you make, providing good arguments, and using correct terminology.*
 - *It is also testing your AO3 evaluation skills [15]. You can gain AO3 marks by interpreting the evidence, discussing the arguments and evaluating them, and coming to a conclusion.*
 - *This question makes specific reference to the issue of **risk management**. This means that you have to include a discussion of this in your answer. However, the whole essay does not need to be about risk management. You should include other arguments as well.*
 - *You need to come to a conclusion. This means that at the end you need to readdress the quote given. Perhaps you could talk about how successful these risk management strategies are.*

3. Discuss the ethical costs of conducting research in psychology. [25]
 - *This question is testing your AO2 application skills [10]. You can gain AO2 marks from providing evidence and examples to support the points you make, providing good arguments, and using correct terminology.*
 - *It is also testing your AO3 evaluation skills [15]. You can gain AO3 marks by interpreting the evidence, discussing the arguments and evaluating them, and coming to a conclusion.*
 - *Unlike the questions above, this makes no specific reference to any of the sub topics. Therefore, you are free to discuss any issues that you like. However, you need to ensure that your answer has a good structure and flow. You do not need to discuss every element of this controversy.*
 - *You need to come to a conclusion. Unlike the other two essays, there is no quote to address. However you still need to come to a conclusion. Perhaps talk about how much psychology is biased, and what can be done to prevent it.*

There is also a question on page 163 in the textbook with notes on how to answer it.