Human ethical guidelines

Lesson 2.4.1 | AS research methodology

Core ideas

Ethical guidelines help researchers treat human participants responsibly and respectfully.

Informed consent means participants should understand what they are agreeing to before taking part.

The right to withdraw means participants can leave a study without pressure or penalty.

Protection from harm means researchers should avoid unnecessary physical or psychological risk.

Confidentiality means personal information should be protected and not reported in an identifiable way.

Debriefing explains the study afterwards, especially if deception was used or participants may feel concerned.

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Key terms

Ethical guideline: A principle for conducting research responsibly.

Informed consent: Agreement to take part after understanding the study.

Right to withdraw: The right to leave a study without pressure or penalty.

Protection from harm: Avoiding unnecessary physical or psychological risk.

Confidentiality: Protecting personal information from being identified.

Deception: Misleading participants or withholding the full aim.

Debriefing: Explaining the study and addressing concerns afterwards.

Privacy: Respecting a person's personal space, information and choices.

Further detail and evidence

Human ethics includes valid informed consent, right to withdraw, minimising harm and maximising benefit, lack of deception, confidentiality, privacy and debriefing. Privacy concerns access to a person or their behaviour; confidentiality concerns protection of identifiable information.

Privacy concerns access to the person, behaviour or personal experiences; confidentiality concerns protecting identifiable data. Avoid deception where possible, explain participation accurately, minimise harm while maximising benefit, maintain withdrawal, and give an appropriate debrief.

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Applying the ideas

Milgram involved concealed aims and apparent shocks, visible distress and pressure from prods. Pozzulo documented parental consent, children's freedom to stop and distress monitoring. These examples support specific ethical analysis instead of assuming every laboratory study has the same risks.

Worked example: For a study using a stressful memory task, name two ethical safeguards and say how each would work. Researchers should protect participants from harm by stopping the task if someone becomes distressed and by avoiding unnecessarily upsetting materials. They should also give the right to withdraw by telling participants they can leave at any point without penalty. These steps reduce risk while still allowing the memory task to be studied.

Worked example: Why should participants be debriefed after a study that used deception? Deception can mean participants did not fully understand the true aim or procedure when they agreed to take part. A debriefing can explain what really happened, why deception was used, and give participants a chance to ask questions or withdraw their data. This does not make deception automatically acceptable, but it helps reduce harm and restore informed understanding.

Evaluation and connections

Consent is ongoing, and a signature does not remove later withdrawal. Children need suitable guardian permission and willing assent. Debriefing does not automatically undo harm. Distinguish documented safeguards, plausible risks and details not reported; absence of reporting is not proof that every safeguard was absent.