

CRITERIA FOR AN ETHICAL STUDY

The five principal criteria for ensuring a psychological study meets the ethical guidelines

There are five main guidelines proposed by the **British Psychological Society** which all psychological studies must meet in order to be “ethical,” as outlined below:

- ✎ the experimenter must have **informed consent** from the subjects
- ✎ the study must not be **deceptive** to the subjects
- ✎ the subjects of the study must have the **right to withdraw** from the study at anytime
- ✎ the subjects of the study must be **debriefed** fully after the experiment
- ✎ the experimenters must have **competence** with relation to the study

INFORMED CONSENT

All participants who agree to take part in the experiment must know what the study is about

Observations may be carried out without consent, but they should be carried out in a public setting where people know that they are likely to be seen

DECEIT

Deception (or beguilement, deceit, bluff or subterfuge) is the act of convincing another to believe information that is not true, or not the whole truth as in certain types of half-truths

It is important to consider the level of deceit when evaluating experiments because it is one of the ethical considerations

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

It should be made clear to the participants, before and during the experiment, that they have the right to withdraw at anytime during the study. It should be made part of the instructions given to the participants before the trial

Even if they have been offered payment, they still have the right to withdraw at any time

They should be asked if they want to continue after the briefing at the beginning of the experiment and periodically throughout the rest of the study

DEBRIEFING

Debriefing is what takes place after an experiment. It is a short interview between the researchers and the participants immediately following their participation in the experiment

It is essential all participants are informed fully of the true nature of the experiment they have just been a part of and that they were not harmed in any way

It is fundamental that debriefing takes place following a psychological study which involves deceiving the participants

This is an important process because it works as a good measure of evaluating the study, as you can ask the participants how well the deception was and the experimenter can ask if they had successfully predicted they knew they were being deceived. This is because if so, their knowledge could have compromised the data – so they would need to be excluded from the analysis

For that reason, many psychologists will have a debriefing following their study, even if the deception was minimal and the experiment was non-stressful

COMPETENCE

Competency refers to possessing the requisite knowledge to undertake one’s agreed-upon functions with those whom a psychologist works. It means that one is able to perform in a professional manner and understands one’s abilities and limitations:

- understanding the implications of the study
- knowing the ethical guidelines
- getting advice in areas the researcher is not confident
- being suitably qualified to run the experiment
- adhering to safe practices
- adhering to the Data Protection Act
- knowing where and how to store data