

A guide to ethics in practical research activities for pre-tertiary psychology teachers and students

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PLEASE NOTE:

- This document is intended to provide guidance only. Ultimately, ethical practice in research is the responsibility of the researcher and their supervisor (teacher / institution). Professional judgement must be used.
- Other formats of this document are available on request, via the ATP website: www.theATP.org.
- This guidance may be freely copied & distributed for educational purposes; please acknowledge the source.
- As ethics in research is a constantly-developing field, this document will be updated from time to time. Your comments and suggestions for future versions would be appreciated; please contact the ATP via the website: www.theATP.org.
- **The ATP encourages awarding bodies and other educational organisations to include a note and link in their psychology specifications and other publications, referring teachers to this guidance – at www.theATP.org – as well as to the British Psychological Society’s ethics guidance – www.bps.org.uk.**

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Section A: Aim, scope and rationale

Aim

The aim of this document is to provide guidance for college lecturers, school teachers and their students on the ethical conduct of practical research tasks in psychology. This guidance from the *Association for the Teaching of Psychology* (ATP) is intended to be of use as a form of peer support to assist teachers in making judgments on ethical matters in their students' research activity, in order to minimize risk and thus avoid potentially serious consequences of unethical practice, for themselves and others.

Scope of this guidance

- This guidance is intended to apply to students' psychological research tasks whether formally assessed or not, and whether they are undertaken within courses named 'Psychology' (eg A-level, Higher, International Baccalaureate) or within any other course, such as sciences and social sciences, and whether the course is regarded as 'academic' (eg A-level) or 'vocational' (eg health and social care courses).
- This guidance is a distillation of the experience and expertise of ATP members, who, collectively, are psychology educators with a wealth of teaching, assessment, examining, and research experience, and are familiar with all UK awarding bodies and pre-tertiary course specifications.
- This guidance draws extensively on the four key principles of the British Psychological Society's *BPS Code of Human Research Ethics* (2010).¹ Throughout this document, it is referred to as the 'BPS Code'.
- Ethical practice in practical psychological research tasks is essential, whatever the course specification's requirements, whatever the teacher's style of delivery, and whatever the methodology, whether experimental or non-experimental. It is just as important in student research as in professional research.
- This guidance is relevant to all stages of practical research: students are sometimes required to carry out one complete investigation, from planning through to a finished report (as in the current Higher, and A-levels in previous years), and sometimes they are asked to carry out several different steps for different research questions and different methods (eg planning, introduction/literature review, data analysis, discussion). Ethical practice is essential even if the task 'only' requires planning of procedure without actual data collection².
- This guidance applies whether practical research tasks are conducted individually or as group work. The latter is, however, preferable as the BPS regards the ability to work in partnership with others as an ethical matter, part of psychologists' 'shared collective duty for the welfare of human beings' (BPS Code, p.11).
- This guidance applies regardless of who selects the research topics - the awarding body, the teacher or the student. In all cases, the teacher should assess risk and closely monitor students' research to ensure

¹ www.bps.org.uk/publications/policy-and-guidelines/research-guidelines-policy-documents/research-guidelines-poli

² If we were to allow our students to plan an unethical investigation we would place them in a highly confusing situation. Learning and assessment should be authentic, ie they should reflect real-life practices in the discipline. We would be doing our students a great disservice if we allowed them to plan, say, a Milgram or Piliavin-style experiment, or any other procedure that would be unethical if put into practice - we would not be teaching them psychology, and if the tasks are for assessment, the assessment would have poor validity. Plenty of interesting ideas for practical, authentic research can be found in various resources banks (eg exam boards, research skills textbooks, www.resourcd.com, etc).

procedures are ethical. Awarding bodies which set topics often provide topic-specific ethical guidance (as well as generic ethical guidance for all research tasks). Where students select their own topic, and especially where classes are large, ensuring ethical practice represents a substantial challenge for the teacher.

- This guidance assumes that student practical research work mainly involves interaction with human participants; where this is not the case, eg where archival data is used, or where non-human animals are studied, additional guidance should be sought.
- This guidance includes a section on special issues relating to research using online communication, based on the BPS document *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013)³; the same basic ethics principles apply, but there are additional considerations, and as online technologies will continue to develop rapidly, so the guidance on IMR may also change more rapidly than other aspects of ethical practice.
- The target audience for this guidance comprises primarily teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges, however, it may also be deemed suitable for sharing with students. The appended 'Summary checklist of DO's and DON'Ts for students' is designed for the student audience. Teachers may also wish to produce their own shorter, more digestible version of this document for their students.
- This guidance has not been designed as a means of teaching / learning *about* research ethics, but it may be useful in this respect, since any practical research task is normally a vehicle for learning about research methods, including ethical issues. Practical research tasks are normally conducted in the context of a course which includes substantive content on ethics, which demands knowledge and critical understanding of ethics in psychological research.
- This guidance does not address the separate issue of ethical concerns in teaching and learning in psychology, for example the teaching of sensitive issues which may cause students discomfort or distress. Buskist and Davis' book, '*Handbook of the Teaching of Psychology*'⁴, includes several chapters on teaching controversial psychology topics, including race, gender, religion, drugs, and evolution. In particular, the chapter by Finken (2006)⁵ on the teaching of sexuality provides useful guidance applicable to teaching sensitive topics in general. In the same book, Woody (2006)⁶ discusses ethical teaching in psychology more generally. See also the APA code⁷, Section 7, for ethics in teaching and training in psychology.
- This guidance does not address ethics of professional practice which apply to psychologists dealing with clients; its scope is limited to teachers and students, in the teaching and learning context.
- This guidance does not claim to be comprehensive nor offer a 'rule book' to cover every eventuality; rather, it aims to offer a clear and firm framework to guide ethical decision-making on student research.

³ www.bps.org.uk/publications/policy-and-guidelines/research-guidelines-policy-documents/research-guidelines-poli

⁴ Buskist, W. and S.F. Davies, S.F. (Eds) *Handbook of the Teaching of Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

⁵ Finken, L. (2006) Teaching Human Sexuality. In W. Buskist and S.F. Davies (Eds) *Handbook of the Teaching of Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell. 196-201.

⁶ Woody, W.D. (2006) Ethical Teaching. In W. Buskist and S.F. Davies (Eds) *Handbook of the Teaching of Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell. 221-227.

⁷ www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx

3. The changing landscape of student research in psychology

Amongst psychology educators there is wide consensus on the value of practical research experience for students, and all introductory psychology courses in the UK – whether pre-tertiary or undergraduate – therefore include a requirement for practical research activity. Whilst its educational value is undisputed, for pre-tertiary teachers and lecturers it should be recognised that the supervision of student practical research is a serious responsibility with multiple layers: not only must they ensure that students' research participants are treated ethically, but they must also ensure their students' own safety and wellbeing, as well as safeguarding themselves in the event of negative consequences of student research, such as complaints to the school or awarding body from participants, or penalisation of students' marks, including knock-on effects of such penalisation on the teacher and their centre.

For many years the BPS has published guidance on ethical practice in research and in the psychology professions. The current research guidance - the *BPS Code of Human Research Ethics* (2010) - is one of a set of BPS ethics documents, the overarching one being the *BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009)⁸. In the UK and elsewhere⁹, approaches to ethical practice in psychological research have become increasingly rigorous over the last decade or so. For example, all universities and other establishments where psychological research is conducted with human participants now have an ethics committee, to which all professional (and some students') research proposals in the institution must be submitted for ethical approval. In the wider context, there is constant debate over what is ethical and what is not, and rightly so: "...the understandings of ethics in research are constantly developing" (*BPS Code of Human Research Ethics*, 2010, p.3).

At the time of writing (February 2015), the BPS Code does not explicitly address the issue of ethical practice in pre-tertiary student research projects (although it does give guidance for undergraduate students)¹⁰. Research by school and college students entails certain distinctive ethical issues, therefore this ATP guidance is intended to fill this gap¹¹. Awarding bodies generally do provide guidance on ethics, however advice can vary, or may simply refer teachers and students to the BPS Code. This guidance aims to achieve a more consistent approach, and **the ATP encourages awarding bodies to include a note and link in their specifications to refer teachers to this ethics guidance, as well as to the BPS Code.**

The nature and extent of practical research work by pre-tertiary students has changed markedly in recent years, and change is likely to continue, especially in terms of assessment requirements. Up to 2008, all psychology A-level specifications included 'coursework', usually comprising one whole project involving research design, data collection and analysis, and a research report, in total worth 20% of external assessment marks. The coursework requirement was removed from all A-level specifications as part of the curriculum revision of 2008. Practical research tasks are still carried out on A-level courses, however these are assessed by exam rather than coursework, therefore the extent of practical work in reality is hard to determine. New A-level specifications come into force in 2015-16. In Scotland the assessed coursework requirement for NQ Higher Psychology continues (provided by the Scottish Qualifications Authority [SQA]); students carry out an 'Assignment' (previously called the Research Investigation, or RI), worth 40% (previously 20%) of the final Higher marks. For GCSE (England & Wales), currently all specifications state that psychology students are expected to carry out practical research tasks; at the equivalent level in Scotland, NQ National 5, such tasks are required and assessed for the course award.

⁸ www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct_home.cfm.

⁹ See, *inter alia*, www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx, www.bdp-verband.org/bdp/verband/ethik.shtml.

¹⁰ If BPS pre-tertiary guidance is published BPS in future, ATP and BPS guidance documents may complement each other.

¹¹ This document is essentially an updated version of the '*ATP Guide to Ethics for Teachers and Students of Psychology at Pre-degree Level*' (2003).

4. Why is this ethics guidance needed now?

Teachers frequently tell the ATP that they and their students want clear, firm ethics support. Awarding bodies normally want to include clear ethics guidance in their specifications. Students increasingly use email, online forums and social media to communicate with participants; internet-mediated research (IMR) throws up additional ethical concerns.

Unfortunately, some ethically dubious practices have occurred in student work, for example:

- using under-16s as participants
- asking highly personal questions in surveys
- breaching confidentiality
- depriving people of sleep
- staging an 'emergency' in a public place
- ...etc.

There is clearly a need for practical research ethics guidance for pre-tertiary teachers and students. Naturally, all psychology teachers should be familiar with, and should abide by, the most up-to-date version of the BPS Code, however, as explained above, the Code currently applies mainly to academic / professional researchers, whereas *pre-tertiary student* research entails certain additional ethical requirements. **There are important differences between professional research and student research in terms of ethical implications, including:**

- Some practices which are ethically sensitive are tolerable (with *caveats*) in 'real-life' research because researchers can apply the arguments that 'the end justifies the means' (ie it is claimed the findings will eventually lead to improvements in societal wellbeing), or that the participants may themselves benefit eventually. **These arguments cannot be applied to student research**, therefore ethically sensitive procedures by students cannot be justified.
- Student researchers are relatively **unskilled in dealing sensitively with people**, and may unwittingly upset or offend. The researcher-participant relationship potentially entails a power imbalance which may be difficult to navigate for novice researchers. Therefore a more risk-averse approach is needed in the form of quite rigorous ethical 'rules', to guide the nature of researcher-participant interactions.
- A major difference is **where the responsibility for ethical practice lies**. Academic and professional researchers take responsibility for their own research (supported by ethics committee approval), and are generally qualified to do so. Students cannot be expected to bear this responsibility; it is up to their teacher or centre to ensure their students' work is ethical. Indeed, teachers should check all guidance from the awarding body and/or their own institution to ascertain who is assigned responsibility for ethical practice, as this would be a key issue in any 'worst case scenario' of unethical practice. Teachers may consult colleagues, or their local university's department or their ethics committee, on ethical issues. Of course, the responsibility for the wellbeing of students' participants is in addition to the teacher's ongoing responsibility for the wellbeing of the students themselves, as they are being required to interact with other people for the purpose of their psychology course. In planning practical research, teachers should, in order to safeguard their own interests as well as others', ensure that they are complying with all relevant internal policies and procedures of their institution or local authority, and indeed legislation, eg on child protection / safeguarding¹², data protection, health and safety, bullying etc.

¹² See statutory guidance from HM Government, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2013) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children>

- Professional psychologists and researchers are expected to use professional judgment in matters of ethics, however, pre-tertiary psychology teachers have varied backgrounds, varying levels of confidence in their knowledge of research ethics, and variable access to sources of support such as links with a university department or ethics committee. Many are 'lone' psychology teachers without the support of a subject team in their centres.

Therefore, in light of the above differences between professional research and student research, additional constraints should be applied to the latter. All research involving human participants has some degree of risk attached, and the BPS Code sees **assessment of risk** as a crucial component of judgement and decision-making on research ethics¹³.

For pre-tertiary student research it is best to err on the side of caution, thus **the key recommendation is that no practical research task should involve more than minimal risk**. Examples of research involving 'more than minimal risk' are given in the BPS Code (p.13).

¹³ Where planned research entails 'significant' risk – and such research must only be carried out by qualified, professional psychologists / researchers - the Code stresses the need for thorough ethical protocols and liability insurance for researcher(s) (p. 16).

Section B: The guidance

1. The purpose and value of student practical research activity

The purpose of practical research activity on any psychology course is to give students an opportunity to gain first-hand experience of designing research, gathering data and reporting findings. Practical research tasks help students to develop hands-on investigative skills and also to gain a better understanding of psychological concepts covered in the course, by applying that knowledge to practical research tasks.

Psychology is the science of human behaviour and experience, therefore research must be carried out with human participants, ie 'real people', and people must be treated with dignity and respect. Not all psychological research has shown care and respect towards participants, therefore psychologists' associations in many countries have devised ethical codes which all psychologists, and psychology students, must observe.

2. The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010): the four Ethical Principles

This guidance for students is closely based on the BPS Code, which sets out four ethical principles to guide all psychological research:

- i. **Respect for the Autonomy, Privacy and Dignity of Persons**
- ii. **Scientific Value**
- iii. **Social Responsibility**
- iv. **Maximising Benefit and Minimising Harm**

Each principle includes a 'value statement', reflecting fundamental **beliefs** about human beings and how we should behave towards each other, and a 'set of standards', indicating the kind of ethical, professional **behaviour** that the BPS expects of psychologists. Below, guidance is given on ethical issues that commonly arise in research (including student research); all fall within the framework of the four BPS principles, and most are concerned with the first and fourth principles, 'Respect...' and 'Maximising Benefit / Minimising Harm':

- Informed consent
- Withdrawal
- Debriefing
- Privacy
- Confidentiality
- Deception
- Protection of participants from harm
- Requests from participants for advice

i. Respect for the Autonomy, Privacy and Dignity of Persons

"Good psychological research is only possible if there is mutual respect and trust between investigators and participants." BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010, p.4)

Informed consent

Researchers must obtain the **consent** of participants to take part. This must be **informed consent** which means that the researcher must explain the purpose and design of the research *before* requesting consent, since otherwise, consent is not valid. Informed consent is essential, even if it means that participants will

guess the aim of the research and that this will affect their responses. To ensure they have understood what participation involves, it is best to tell them the information and ask for consent verbally, as well as giving them the information on paper and obtaining their signature. Face-to-face communication shows respect and is an important aspect of developing the interpersonal skills that a psychology researcher needs.

Children and young people under 16 years of age, and people with learning disabilities or brain disorders, should not be used as participants in student research. This is because they are regarded as vulnerable groups by the BPS and they may not have the capacity to give informed consent. In professional research using such participants, consent would be sought from a parent or carer, however this is not an option for research by students. Another reason for avoiding such participants is the need to protect participants from harm (see below); as students are novice researchers, there is an increased risk of unwittingly causing upset when dealing with vulnerable people. Even with non-vulnerable people, students must be careful not to intimidate or exert undue pressure to participate.

Some psychology students are themselves under 16 years of age, eg on GCSE or National 5 courses, therefore teachers must exert extra care in dealing with practical work by this age group. It may be acceptable for 15-year-old students to use their classmates, also aged 15+, as participants, under certain conditions: the research tasks should be carried out under direct supervision by the psychology teacher, within the school. If other students in the year group are used, permission should in addition be sought from a senior member of staff with pastoral responsibility, such as a Head of Year. Of course, consent must still be obtained from the participants themselves. If a course is being delivered online, such that there is little or no student-teacher contact in person, it may be possible for the psychology teacher to arrange for supervision by a teacher in the student's own school/college. Teachers should also be aware that under education and safeguarding legislation, schools and colleges have safeguarding responsibilities for young people up to 18 years of age.

Sometimes the aim of the research is compromised if *full* information is given prior to collecting data (for example, if participants know that gender differences are being investigated, their responses may be biased by their existing attitudes), therefore it is acceptable to withhold such information as long as participants are told in advance that some information is being withheld and it will be given to them afterwards (BPS Code, p.18). Note that the withholding of information in this way is *not* the same as deception.

Students may consider offering incentives to recruit participants, however there is an element of risk attached to offering rewards, financial or otherwise, in that consent may no longer be considered completely 'free'. Also, schools may have internal policies relevant to this issue. The BPS Code advises against 'disproportionate' rewards (p.20); if students offer their participants a sweet (or something healthier!) this would be acceptable.

One exception to the requirement to obtain consent is where naturalistic observation is the methodology adopted. In this case, data collection should only take place **in situations where people would normally expect to be in public view**, such as a shopping centre or train station. This is not regarded as a violation of privacy and is acceptable, even though participants are neither aware of being participants, nor have they given consent. However, awarding bodies and centres may prohibit any form of data collection outwith the institution.

Withdrawal

This is in effect an extension of the principle of consent: just because a person has agreed to take part at the start does not mean that they are obliged to see it through to the end. Participants must be told that they have a right to **withdraw**, without penalty and without having to give any reason, at any stage of the research. This includes the opportunity to have their data destroyed after completing the procedure. There

are occasions when, for whatever reason, participants feel uncomfortable or threatened by the situation but feel unable or too embarrassed to say so. For example, an ordinary everyday word in a memory test may have a particular, unpleasant association for an individual due to some past experience (which no-one could anticipate); s/he may therefore be upset and needs to know they can immediately leave the situation if they wish.

A good way to put informed consent and right to withdraw into practice is to provide participants with an **information brief** and a **consent slip** setting out the details of the research; they can then be asked to sign, confirming that they feel they have been given enough info, have had the opportunity to ask questions, have been told that they can withdraw at any time, and have agreed to take part. Students (or preferably their teachers) should keep these slips securely. If a research report is written for assessment, **check exam board requirements** on what to do with signed consent forms, as some may require forms to be submitted as evidence of data collection, whereas others may treat the inclusion of signed consent forms as a breach of confidentiality, which might be penalised (see below).

Like informed consent (see above), the right to withdraw does not normally apply where naturalistic observation is carried out and participants are unaware that they are research participants.

Debriefing

At the end of the research procedure, participants should be **debriefed**, by thanking them and explaining some further details of the research. Any further questions they have should be answered, the intention being to make sure that the **participants leave the research situation, as far as possible, in the state in which they entered it**. The debrief provides another opportunity to minimise any harm to participants (see below). Participants who feel unhappy about taking part can choose at this point to have their data destroyed. It is good practice to give all participants a slip with contact details in case they have any further queries later: students should give a school /college email or phone number and teacher's name, *not* their own contact details.

Whilst the debrief is very important, and may mitigate any negative effects of a research procedure, it must not be regarded as a justification or excuse for causing participants discomfort or upset; for example, if participants are deliberately put under some sort of stress, it is not acceptable to simply say 'this is ok because I'll debrief them afterwards'.

Where **naturalistic observation** is carried out, it is accepted that debriefing may be impossible, and in any case a debrief may be considered undesirable, but students should still acknowledge this ethical issue when writing up.

Privacy

Students should not ask participants for any information that is irrelevant to the research question; that would be bad practice in terms of methodology as well as potentially unethical. Student research tasks should not involve obtaining information on **personal experiences such as health, relationships** etc, which may be seen as intrusive and insensitive, and may cause discomfort or embarrassment (see also below, on 'minimising harm'). People's intimate behaviours *are* often studied by psychologists, but this requires skill and experience, therefore such topics should be avoided by novice researchers, no matter how fascinating!

Confidentiality

Any information provided by participants must be treated **confidentially** and researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their identities will not be revealed, either by their names, or names of centres, or any other identifying features. This right is enshrined in the Data Protection Act. If researchers were to tell friends or family members about any information given by a participant, such as their views in an attitude survey, or their score on a memory task, that would be a betrayal of trust, and if the participant found out they would have good reason to complain to the school /college (and may be unlikely to agree to take part in research in future). To preserve **anonymity**, codes or numbers or false names can be used to keep track of participant material collected; response sheets such as questionnaires or experimental response sheets should not ask for the participant's name. We are all interested in the details of other people's lives, and if we learn something interesting or unusual it is very tempting to share that information with friends. But researchers must behave professionally, and resist this temptation!

Deception

Student research should not involve a 'significant element' of deception of participants, even if the procedure seems harmless. In professional research deception has sometimes been used (eg the 'Good Samaritan' studies of bystander behaviour) but in student research it is generally unacceptable, unless minor. If minor deception is planned (for example, participants in a conformity study are shown false estimates of the number of pasta pieces in a jar), **researchers must be able to justify this decision**: it may be argued that the behaviour would be impossible to investigate in any other way. In addition, teachers and peers should be consulted. In other words, researchers should show, in any written report, their awareness of the ethical implications of their procedure and of the possible effects on the participants, as well as the steps they will take to mitigate such effects, such as debriefing immediately after the procedure.

Overall, respect for participants should be underpinned by awareness of (and gratitude for!) the goodwill of participants who are giving of their time and effort. Without their help, student research would be impossible; remember that participants have nothing to gain from it, unlike some instances of professional research.

ii Scientific Value

This is the second of the four principles. The main purpose of student research work is to facilitate learning, therefore, unlike professional research, it is not expected to contribute to psychological knowledge (although, exceptionally, it may do so). However, in selecting topics for student research, the criterion of 'scientific value' should still be applied, not so much as an ethical consideration but rather to ensure appropriate learning about real-life psychological research.

iii Social Responsibility

This is the third of the four principles, stating that "Psychological knowledge must be generated and used for beneficial purposes" (BPS Code, p.10). Whilst it is unlikely that findings of student research will be applied in this way, again, the criterion of 'Social Responsibility' should still be referred to in selecting research topics, in order to ensure appropriate learning about the ethical obligations of psychology researchers towards society.

iv Maximising Benefit and Minimising Harm

“Harm to research participants must be avoided....the risk of harm must be no greater than that encountered in ordinary life” (BPS Code, p.11)

This is the fourth BPS principle. In student research, ‘**minimising harm**’ (to participants) is top priority and researchers must avoid “potential risks to psychological well-being, mental health, personal values, or dignity” (BPS Code, p.11). The research situation must not put them at greater **risk of harm** than they would encounter in their everyday life. Students must discuss proposed research with their teacher and fellow students in order to identify any potential harm or distress involved in the procedure – which may not be immediately obvious. The ‘**minimal risk**’ approach should again be adopted, therefore students should not investigate participants’ **personal experiences** of certain socially sensitive areas of behaviour, such as: sexual behaviour, experience of violence or abuse, or traumatic events, experience of addiction, use of illegal substances, or health (physical or mental). As well as potentially causing distress, such research would also violate privacy.

This is not to say that research should never be carried out on such topics: the key aspect is that **participants’ own personal experiences should not be probed**; studies such as a survey of *attitudes* towards certain topics may still be ‘safe’ and acceptable as long as students understand, and it is made very clear to participants, that they are *not* being asked about personal experiences.

The recommendation that the minimum age of participants should be 16 years is discussed above, as it is recognised that young people are considered vulnerable. Again, teachers should note that schools and colleges have legal obligations in terms of safeguarding responsibilities for young people up to 18 years of age.

As far as potential harm to student researchers themselves is concerned, **students must not collect data in any environment that could involve danger to themselves**, such as observations late at night, in pubs or clubs, on busy road junctions, etc. In any case, neither the exam boards nor teachers will require such research tasks.

In professional research, there may be a need to ‘consider the costs to the individual participant versus potential societal benefits’ (BPS Code, p.12); it is an inconvenient truth that some of the past research that is now considered unethical actually produced some of our most important and ultimately beneficial knowledge about human nature (eg Milgram, Harlow). Thankfully, student researchers should not have to face this dilemma as they will not be putting their participants at risk of harm.

Requests for advice from participants

Participants sometimes believe that because someone is studying psychology, they have the knowledge and skill to offer advice on, for example, personal problems. People may even ask psychology students whether they can “analyse” them or tell what they are thinking! In such situations it is important that the student researcher makes it clear to participants that s/he is *not* a qualified psychologist; all psychologists (and psychology students) should be aware of the **limits of their own competence**, and of the potential harm they may cause if they give advice which they are not qualified to give. Students should **tell their teacher immediately** if any participant asks for advice, and teachers should be able to provide **information on where professional help can be found**, if appropriate.

In fact, if a student is concerned about any of their participants, they should share that information with their teacher/lecturer as soon as possible. As well as signs of stress or psychological distress, sometimes a procedure that uses physical measures, such as heart rate or blood pressure, can suggest some kind of abnormality.

3. Internet-mediated Research (IMR) – special considerations

“IMR can be broadly defined as any research involving the remote acquisition of data from or about human participants using the internet and its associated technologies.” *BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013, p.3)

Students increasingly use email, online surveys, social media, forum posts etc as ways of recruiting participants and collecting data for research. These media offer tremendous advantages in terms of quickly and easily obtaining responses from large numbers of participants, however, it is easy to overlook the additional ethical concerns that online media can entail. The BPS has published a useful document, on which the guidance below is based: *BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013).

- Without face-to-face contact, the researcher does not have direct oversight of participants’ reactions, therefore there is **increased risk of harm**, as discomfort or distress may go undetected. In addition, student research participants should be 16+, but this may not be verifiable when responses are given online.
- **Valid consent, withdrawal and debriefing** are harder to put into practice online; it is acceptable (eg for an online survey) to inform the participant that by completing the questionnaire they are giving consent to take part. Participants should also be told that they may skip questions or withdraw at any point (as in traditional methods). Many online questionnaires will not allow you to proceed if you miss out a question! This is not only ethically unsound but may produce invalid data (or an aborted response). A debrief should also be provided, however the problem remains that the researcher has no way of knowing whether the participant actually read it. Regarding consent, a useful point from the BPS IMR ethics guidelines is:
“..it is recommended good practice to include a check box (for example) in response to an explicit consent statement (offered both at the start and the end of the procedure).” *BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013, p.9)
- The principles of **privacy, confidentiality and anonymity** are also difficult to ensure online, and violations are more likely, because whatever is posted online may be ultimately permanent and traceable; this represents a risk of harm, which researchers must make clear to (potential) participants, and should also take steps to minimise the risk. For example, if the researcher wishes to include participants’ words in a report, these should be paraphrased rather than quoted verbatim, as an online search on the quote could then lead to the participant being identified. Researchers should refrain from reporting the name or web address of any discussion forum from which data has been gathered, as that may also increase identifiability of participants. Likewise, forum users’ pseudonyms should not be given, as they should be treated confidentially, in the same way as a person’s real name (eg anonymised).
“Researchers need to be aware that it is impossible to maintain absolute confidentiality of participants’ personal information gathered online because the networks are not in the control of the researcher.” *BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013, p.10).
- Even **emails**, which we tend to think of as private, are generally non-secure unless encrypted. When using email for recruiting participants and/or collecting data, if student researchers do not have encryption available they should inform their participants of this limitation to confidentiality.
- The researcher’s lack of control in IMR can reduce the **validity** of the research: unknown to the researcher, all sorts of factors can vary - screen features (size, brightness, colour etc), speed of connection, physical environment, presence of other people, etc. This concern is more serious in methodologies requiring tight control, and less worrying in the case of, say, a survey; however,

researchers should be aware that the general lack of control means that the ethical principle of 'Scientific Value' may be compromised.

- A content analysis of online discussions probably seems completely harmless, as it may involve no live interaction with people. This method can be acceptable, but researchers must still remember that ownership of the content on social network sites often lies with the service provider, including communications between individuals (which might be assumed to be 'private'). Researchers should consider from whom they should seek **permission (consent) to use online data**. If someone discovers that their posts have been analysed for research without their valid consent, they may have the right under the Data Protection Act to stop the data being used, especially if it makes them identifiable. This is unlikely to happen in reality but should nevertheless be seriously considered. Researchers should also be wary in view of the fact that some content is protected by **copyright law**.
- It is probably true that many participants would not worry in the least about their online communications being accessible to all, and their identity being traced. Many people have weak security settings on their social media accounts, although increased awareness of identity theft, credit card fraud etc, may be leading to greater caution in general. Regardless of participants' own attitudes, the researcher has a **responsibility** to protect participants as far as possible.

The concerns described above in terms of IMR do represent real risk of harm; most of the ethical principles can be easily compromised online, therefore, in light of the reduced ability to ensure privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, **it is especially important to avoid sensitive topics**. It has already been recommended that student researchers avoid sensitive topics, even when using traditional methods, and that advice is even stronger in the case of online research; again, students should adopt a 'minimal risk' strategy.

4. Some final points

- Although these guidance notes are quite detailed, teachers and students should always carefully **check awarding bodies' specification documents for particular ethical requirements**. This is especially important where practical work is assessed, as marks may be available for content referring to ethics; for example, one awarding body states that ethical issues should be described both in terms of 'routine' or generic procedures (such as informed consent, withdrawal and debriefing, which apply to virtually all research), and ethical considerations that are specific to the task (eg deception, or avoidance of items on sensitive personal experiences in a questionnaire).
- Often there are no easy answers to ethical dilemmas, and we have a duty to **consult colleagues** on any issue we are unsure about.
- Students should be aware that, in taking on the role of a psychology researcher, they must not do **anything that may bring the psychology professions into disrepute**.
- Overall researchers must strive to be **honest, accurate, clear** and **fair** in interactions with participants and all those involved in the research; this is what the BPS Code refers to as **integrity**.
- **Finally, it is worth re-iterating the key message that no student practical research task should involve more than minimal risk.**

Section C: Summary checklist of DO's and DON'TS for students

DO	DON'T
Be sensitive to feelings of participants; treat them with <i>respect</i> . Be polite and friendly, and show gratitude for their participation. Use respectful language in written reports.	Don't intimidate participants or put them under pressure to take part. Don't embarrass or humiliate them. Don't abuse the 'power' of the researcher role.
Make sure that you plan (and carry out where applicable) all <i>routine</i> ethical procedures, ie informed consent, withdrawal, debriefing, confidentiality etc, which apply to all research.	Don't treat ethics as a 'bolt-on'; ethical awareness and practice are key in developing research skills and an understanding of psychological research in general.
Recognise that there will be additional ethical issues that are <i>specific</i> to your particular study.	Don't forget to describe and evaluate these in your written reports / presentations.
Avoid <i>sensitive topics</i> , as these involve greater risk of harming participants.	Don't ask people about their <i>personal experiences</i> of sensitive topics such as their health, relationships, sexual behaviour, drugs, violence, abuse, trauma, discrimination, etc.
Approach other students (16+) and staff at your school / college to be participants.	Don't use <i>vulnerable</i> people as participants, ie under-16s, people with learning disabilities, mental health problems or brain disorder. Use of 15+ participants may be possible in certain circumstances – see above.
Collect data from participants in a <i>safe, familiar environment</i> , preferably within your school / college.	Don't approach people to be participants in the street, shopping mall, pub or club, or other public place.
Ensure your research is ethical even if you are only required to make a research <i>plan</i> (which you're not required to carry out).	Don't plan unethical research, even if it is only a plan.
Tell your teacher immediately if a participant appears to be distressed or unwell, or if they ask you for help or advice.	Don't try to give 'psychological advice' to any participants, as you are not qualified to do so.
Adopt a ' <i>minimal risk</i> ' approach; consider carefully all possible risks to participant well-being and take steps to minimise these.	Don't make a blinkered assumption that a task or procedure is 'harmless', even if it appears so at first sight.