

Teacher's Guide

Ethical principles such as informed consent and the autonomy of individuals are critical to psychological research in order to protect the dignity and safety of subjects. **The Archives of the History of American Psychology** at the **Cummings Center for the History of Psychology** houses materials relating to the history of ethics in psychological science and key experiments that have challenged or highlighted the need for these ethical principles. Many of these materials are publicly available in the online exhibit [*Before Belmont: Ethics in Experimental Psychology*](#).

The following projects are intended for high school and undergraduate college classrooms to help your students explore ethical principles and their practical application to psychological research. Students should have basic knowledge of psychological research in order to think critically about the evolution of ethical research design. These projects are to be used in combination with the contents of the *Before Belmont* online exhibit.

Before Belmont: Ethics in Experimental Psychology

Level: high school, undergraduate college students

Time: 20 minutes (in class); 60-75 minutes (independent work)

Objectives: By the end of this activity, students will:

1. have a general understanding of informed consent, quality of consent, and the use of deception in experimental psychology
2. have a general understanding of how to identify violations of ethical standards in psychological and experimental contexts
3. have a general understanding of how historical events and key experiments have impacted the development of ethical standards

These objectives contribute to outcomes 1.2C, 3.1b, 3.1c, and 5.1F of the [*APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major, Version 2.0*](#) and Research Methods, Measurement, and Statistics Standards 2.1 and 2.2 of the [*APA National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula*](#).

BEFORE the exhibit [5 minutes]

Ask your students how they feel about conducting psychological research with human participants. What are some challenges of working with human participants?

DURING the exhibit [60-75 minutes]

Students will independently open and read through the full *Before Belmont* exhibit at <https://uakron.edu/chp/education/before-belmont>. While navigating through the exhibit, students

Before Belmont: Ethics in Experimental Psychology

will complete the scavenger hunt activity (*Activities*, pages 1-2) and the critical thinking prompts (*Activities*, pages 3-6). An answer sheet for both is included on the following pages.

AFTER the exhibit [15 minutes]

Initiate an open discussion with your students with the following questions:

KNOW: What did you learn from the exhibit? Is there anything that stood out to you as surprising?

FEEL/UNDERSTAND: What do you think it was like for subjects involved in Stanley Milgram's obedience experiment or the Stanford Prison Experiment? What do "informed consent" and "quality of consent" mean, and why are they important? Did the potential harm caused to the subjects outweigh the importance of the findings in these studies? Why or why not?

APPLY: What practices should researchers avoid when working with human participants? How do you think this information will impact your own research? How do we balance the importance of conducting research that answer the questions we are interested in with the importance of respecting and protecting those who participate in our research?

Answer Sheet

SCAVENGER HUNT

1: Who conducted the “Little Albert” classical conditioning study?

John B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner

2: According to Stanley Milgram, why was deception necessary for his obedience study?

Milgram argued that the deceptive nature of the experiment was necessary to ensure that subjects behaved authentically.

3: Which study is Philip Zimbardo best known for?

The Stanford Prison Experiment

4: In 1-2 sentences, what was the “Cook Committee?”

The “Cook Committee” was the APA ad hoc Committee on Ethical Standards in Psychological Research, formed in 1966 to develop a new code of ethics for psychological research. It was led by Stuart Cook, and thousands of psychologists were surveyed via the critical incident approach.

5: Which psychologist studied rhesus monkeys to understand how love, attachment, and physical contact can impact the development of infants?

Harry Harlow

6: In 1-2 sentences, why was the critical incident approach necessary for developing psychology's ethical codes?

Little to no prior ethical standards had been established for the field of psychology. The collection of case studies was necessary to fully document and analyze the wide range of potential ethical considerations that psychologists might face in their research and practice.

7: Who conducted the Robbers Cave study?

Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn Wood Sherif

CRITICAL THINKING PROMPTS

Briefly explain some of the criticisms directed at the Stanford Prison Experiment, both in its immediate aftermath and in the present day. Why do you think Zimbardo and his research team chose to carry out this experiment as a simulation?

Students should note that early ethical criticisms of the Stanford Prison Experiment centered around the quality of consent attained from participants, who may not have fully understood the “severe” nature of the experiment, and the lack of recognition for participants’ right to withdraw from the experiment. They may reference the fact that one participant asked to be released but was convinced to return to his cell. They should further reference modern criticisms related to the experiment’s scientific rigor, applicability to real life situations, and the extent to which guards were coached by the research team.



Students should discuss the fact that deception had, by the 1970s, become commonplace within experimental psychology, and that simulations and “role playing” were suggested as an alternative to this. They should recognize that the research team wanted their study to be applicable to real life situations, such as prison reform, and felt that the study could have a wide impact by replicating a prison environment for its middle-class student participants.

Compare and contrast the “Little Albert” study with Harry Harlow’s research with rhesus monkeys. Does the fact that Harlow carried out his methods on rhesus monkeys, rather than humans, alter your perception of this research? How should ethical standards differ between research with human and animal subjects?

Students should recognize that both studies related to the development of young subjects, and that subjects in both studies were induced to exhibit fear responses as a result of the studies. They may recognize conditions in Harlow’s research as more severe, as the infant rhesus monkeys were deprived entirely of social contact and physical comfort.

Students may have a wide range of perceptions of these studies and ethical standards for human and animal subjects. They may view conditions in both studies as unethical due to their impact on the development of infant subjects. Alternatively, they may view animal research such as Harlow’s as necessary to understand childhood development without negatively impacting human subjects. Students should demonstrate an understanding of the complex nature of this conversation.

Consider Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments and the Robbers Cave study. Do you feel that Milgram and the Sherifs were justified in deceiving their participants? Why or why not?

Students may have a wide range of perspectives on these studies but should recognize that deception was used to ensure that participant reactions authentically reflected real life behavior. They may note the criticism that participants were not fully debriefed in Milgram's experiment, or the fact that the Robbers Cave study at one point escalated to a fist fight. On the other hand, they may bring up the fact that 84% of Milgram's participants later reported that they were glad to have participated in the experiment. They should recognize the central question of balancing validity and applicability of results with the health and safety of research subjects.

Briefly explain the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Why was this study so controversial, and what ethical principles were violated by the research?

Students should be able to explain that the Tuskegee Syphilis Study involved the recruitment of Black men with syphilis, whose health was monitored and studied over the course of 40 years. They should explain that proper treatment, including penicillin, was purposefully withheld from the men, and that they were misled and not given enough information to provide continued informed consent. They should recognize that the selection of Black men for this study reinforced the unfair distribution of research benefits and medical treatment, contributing to an overall culture of racial injustice in medicine and research. They may further recognize that the study led directly to the National Research Act of 1974 and The Belmont Report, which specifically stressed the importance of informed consent, risk-benefit analysis, and subject selection.

