

## Ethical Situations in Psychological Research

### Evaluating Ethics, Consent, Harm, and Responsibility

**Grade Level:** 10–12

**Subjects:** Psychology, Civics, Ethics, Social Studies

**Time Required:** 1 class period (or homework + discussion)

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#### TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

##### Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students evaluate a series of **realistic research scenarios** and determine whether each is **ethical or unethical**. Students must justify their decisions using ethical principles such as **informed consent, harm, deception, vulnerability, coercion, and beneficence**.

The goal is **not agreement**, but **reasoned ethical judgment**.

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##### Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Apply ethical standards to real-world research scenarios
  - Distinguish between ethical and unethical research practices
  - Explain decisions using ethical reasoning rather than opinion
  - Recognize the role of consent, risk, and power imbalance in research
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##### Suggested Procedure

###### 1. Introduction (5 minutes)

Review key ethical principles:

- Informed consent
- Protection from harm
- Right to withdraw
- Deception & debriefing
- Special protections for vulnerable populations

###### 2. Student Work (20–30 minutes)

Students complete the scenarios individually or in small groups.

### 3. Discussion (Optional)

Focus discussion on:

- Disagreements
  - Gray areas
  - Which principles mattered most
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#### Teacher Note

Many scenarios are intentionally **ambiguous**.

Encourage students to defend their answers with **ethical reasoning**, not emotion.

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## STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS

### Directions

Read each scenario carefully.

For **each situation**:

1. Decide whether you believe the situation is **Ethical or Unethical**
2. Write a **brief explanation** supporting your decision

You will be evaluated on the **quality of your reasoning**, not whether your answer matches others.

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## ETHICAL SITUATIONS

### 1. Intellectual Disability and Incentives

James, a 31-year-old man with an intellectual disability, is informed of a research project in which he will participate. He is told that if he performs certain tasks, he will receive ice cream. The tasks are not harmful, and no permanent damage occurs.

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### 2. Teen Substance Abuse Study

Sally, a 14-year-old girl enrolled in a substance-abuse treatment program, is informed of a research project studying the effects of alcohol on academic performance. After treatment, she will be monitored for alcohol use through periodic testing. Her parents are informed, and all involved give consent.

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### 3. Aggression Research Using Monkeys

A researcher studies aggression in male monkeys by locking them in cages, increasing aggression through electric shocks, and then placing them together. Many monkeys fight, and in several cases, the fights result in death.

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### 4. Anti-Depressants on Healthy Teenagers

A research psychiatrist studies the effects of antidepressants by prescribing them to teenagers who show **no signs of depression**. Valuable information is gained, and no long-term effects are recorded.

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### 5. Sleep Deprivation Study (College Students)

A university studies sleep deprivation using volunteers. Participants are informed of all risks and may opt out. They are monitored by a doctor while being kept awake for 48 hours. If dangerous symptoms appear, subjects are removed. After testing, participants receive supervised rest and follow-up evaluations.

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## **6. Observational Study in a High School**

A graduate student studies race relations at a high school with approval from administrators. He observes classrooms, lunch behavior, and school events. No student names are recorded, and no photos are taken.

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## **7. Sexual Arousal Study with Deception**

A university studies sexual arousal in college students. Participants are told they are part of a study but are not told its true purpose. They are placed with actors who attempt to arouse them through explicit materials and conversation. Subjects are later debriefed. Several report discomfort, though no permanent harm occurs.

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## **8. Autism Behavior Modification Study**

Researchers attempt to alter behavior in autistic children using rewards and isolation. Parents initially consent, but later object. Researchers insist the children must continue because consent forms were signed.

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## **9. Cold Exposure Study Using Monkeys**

Researchers study group behavior by lowering temperatures in a monkey habitat, at times below 0°F. The monkeys cooperate to survive. No animals die or suffer long-term injury.

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## **10. Placebo Study (Incomplete Information)**

College students are recruited to test a new anti-hangover drug. They are divided into a group receiving the drug and a group receiving a placebo. They are told the study is about drug effectiveness, but not informed about the placebo element.

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## TEACHER ANSWER KEY & RATIONALES

*(Use as guidance, not absolute truth)*

### 1. Unethical

Even though no harm occurs, James is a **vulnerable population**. Offering ice cream may constitute **coercion**, and it is unclear whether he can give **informed consent**.

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### 2. Generally Ethical

Informed consent is obtained from both the minor and parents. Monitoring is related to treatment, and protections are in place. Ethical **with safeguards**.

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### 3. Unethical

Severe harm and death occur. The experiment violates ethical standards regarding **animal welfare** and **unnecessary suffering**.

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### 4. Unethical

Administering medication with known risks to healthy individuals violates the principle of **non-maleficence**, even if no long-term harm occurs.

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### 5. Ethical

Informed consent, medical supervision, right to withdraw, and follow-up care are present. Risk is minimized and justified.

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### 6. Ethical

This is **non-intrusive observation**, with permissions granted and anonymity protected.

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### 7. Unethical

Use of deception involving **sexual content** without informed consent and reports of distress violates ethical standards, despite debriefing.

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## 8. Unethical

Parents and children retain the **right to withdraw**. Forcing continuation violates consent and exploits a vulnerable population.

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## 9. Debatable / Conditionally Ethical

No deaths or long-term harm occurred, but exposure to extreme cold raises serious **animal welfare concerns**. Often sparks strong debate.

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## 10. Ethical

Placebo use is standard in research **as long as participants are debriefed** and not exposed to harm.

### APA / IRB ETHICAL PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

*(Teacher Reference Section)*

Use these principles as the **lens** students should apply to every scenario.

#### Core APA / IRB Principles (Student-Friendly Language)

1. **Informed Consent** – Participants must understand what they are agreeing to.
2. **Voluntary Participation** – No pressure, coercion, or forced continuation.
3. **Right to Withdraw** – Participants may stop at any time without penalty.
4. **Protection from Harm** – Physical and psychological harm must be minimized.
5. **Beneficence** – Benefits must outweigh risks.
6. **Justice** – Vulnerable populations require extra protection.
7. **Deception** – Allowed only when necessary, minimal, and followed by debriefing.
8. **Debriefing** – Participants must be informed of the true purpose afterward.
9. **Animal Welfare** – Suffering must be minimized; death requires extraordinary justification.
10. **IRB Oversight** – All studies must be reviewed and approved before implementation.

You may want students to **cite which principle is violated or upheld** in each scenario.

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## EXPANDED EXPLANATION OF EACH EXPERIMENT

*(Teacher Answer Key with Deeper Rationale)*

### 1. Intellectual Disability and Incentives — Unethical

#### Key Issues:

- Vulnerable population
- Coercion through reward
- Questionable informed consent

Even though the tasks are harmless, James may not fully understand the research. Offering ice cream introduces **undue influence**, meaning participation may not be truly voluntary.

#### Violated Principles:

Justice, Informed Consent, Voluntary Participation

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### 2. Teen Substance Abuse Study — Generally Ethical (With Safeguards)

#### Key Issues:

- Minor participant
- Parental consent
- Monitoring tied to treatment

Consent is obtained from all parties, monitoring is related to recovery, and safeguards exist. **Ethical if participation is voluntary and withdrawal is allowed.**

#### Upheld Principles:

Informed Consent, Beneficence, Protection from Harm

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### 3. Aggression Research Using Monkeys — Unethical

#### Key Issues:

- Severe suffering
- Death of subjects
- Induced harm

The deliberate increase of aggression leading to death violates modern standards of animal research.

**Violated Principles:**

Animal Welfare, Protection from Harm, Beneficence

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**4. Anti-Depressants on Healthy Teenagers — Unethical****Key Issues:**

- No therapeutic benefit
- Known medical risks
- Non-clinical population

Administering medication without medical need violates **non-maleficence**, even if no long-term harm occurs.

**Violated Principles:**

Protection from Harm, Beneficence

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**5. Sleep Deprivation Study — Ethical****Key Issues:**

- Fully informed consent
- Medical supervision
- Right to withdraw
- Follow-up care

This study mirrors real IRB-approved research designs.

**Upheld Principles:**

Informed Consent, Right to Withdraw, Beneficence, IRB Oversight

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**6. Observational High School Study — Ethical****Key Issues:**

- Public behavior
- No identifying data
- Institutional permission

Non-intrusive observation with anonymity is ethically sound.

## Upheld Principles:

Privacy, Justice, Protection from Harm

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## 7. Sexual Arousal Study — Unethical

### Key Issues:

- Deception involving sexual content
- Psychological distress
- Power imbalance

Deception alone does not make a study unethical — **the nature of the deception does**. Sexual arousal without informed consent crosses ethical boundaries.

### Violated Principles:

Informed Consent, Protection from Harm, Deception Limits

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## 8. Autism Behavior Modification Study — Unethical

### Key Issues:

- Vulnerable population
- Forced continuation
- Psychological harm

Consent can be **withdrawn at any time**. Isolation as punishment is ethically indefensible.

### Violated Principles:

Right to Withdraw, Justice, Protection from Harm

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## 9. Cold Exposure Study with Monkeys — Debatable

### Key Issues:

- Extreme conditions
- No deaths or lasting harm
- Scientific value

This case sparks debate because **outcomes were not harmful**, but **risk was extreme**. IRBs today would likely reject it or demand major modifications.

### Contested Principles:

Animal Welfare, Beneficence

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## 10. Placebo Study — Ethical

### Key Issues:

- Standard research practice
- No deception causing harm
- Debriefing assumed

Placebos are ethical when participants are informed they *may* receive one and are debriefed.

### Upheld Principles:

Deception (Permissible), Beneficence, IRB Standards

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## CASE COMPARISON EXTENSION ACTIVITY

*(High-Value Add-On)*

### Extension Goal

Move students from **isolated judgments** to **comparative ethical reasoning**.

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### Student Directions

Choose **two scenarios** that seem similar but have **different ethical outcomes**.

Compare them using the questions below.

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### Case Comparison Questions

1. Which APA / IRB principles apply to both cases?
  2. Where do they differ ethically?
  3. What single change could make the unethical study ethical?
  4. Does scientific value ever justify increased risk? Why or why not?
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## **Suggested Pairings (Teacher Tip)**

### **Pair**

### **Why It Works**

Sleep Deprivation vs. Antidepressants Risk vs. medical necessity

Observational Study vs. Sexual Arousal Consent vs. deception

Autism Study vs. Teen Substance Study Vulnerable populations handled differently

Cold Monkeys vs. Aggressive Monkeys Animal welfare limits

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## **Optional Writing Extension**

“Choose one unethical study and redesign it so it would meet IRB approval. Explain the changes.”