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In this chapter we will look at what we mean by ethics. We will consider an array of concepts such as morals, ethical issues, ethical guidelines, human rights, ethical relativism and utilitarianism, to name but a few. These can be easily confused by the reader (and by authors, to be fair) but we will try to work our way through as best we can in order to better understand how psychologists develop their ideas of right and wrong and how we end up with the ethical codes that guide our behavior.

**How ethical judgements affect people**

Anyone who works with people has to make judgements about how they should behave and consider what effect their behavior might have on the people they are working with. There are a lot of factors that

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might affect those judgements and sometimes people make decisions that later come to be questioned. The basis for these questions is usually a code of ethics. Look below at two examples of scientific studies that have raised some serious ethical concerns.

The MMR myth

In 1998 a UK medical journal, The Lancet, published a paper from a research team led by Dr. Andrew Wakefield from the Royal Free Hospital in London. The press conference that followed publication made claims of a link between the MMR vaccine (a three-in-one jab for measles, mumps and rubella) and a syndrome of bowel and brain damage in children. This report on 12 children triggered massive media attention and created the myth of a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. The impact of the report and the massive press coverage was to dramatically reduce the confidence of parents in the vaccine and to reduce the number of children who were given it. The number of children receiving the vaccine in the UK dropped from around 85% in 1997 to around 65% in 2003 (data from the UK Department of Health).

The decision to immunize your baby is very important for parents who obviously do not want to do anything to harm their child. The problem with not immunizing your baby, however, is that it increases their risk of childhood diseases and this might have serious consequences. The press coverage put doubt into people’s minds and a question mark appeared over the vaccine. But not everything was as it seemed.

To cut to the chase, the story ended in 2010 when Andrew Wakefield was found guilty of ethical misconduct by the UK General Medical Council (GMC). And how! (For a full review of the story you should go to the blog of Brian Deer, a Sunday Times journalist who unearthed a lot of the details; see Websites.) The GMC enquiry went on for 197 days and concluded that Wakefield was dishonest, unethical, irresponsible and callous. The original paper in The Lancet was found to be dishonestly reported and carried out on children without ethical approval.

In brief, before the research was carried out, Wakefield had made an agreement with a solicitor who was looking for evidence to use against drug companies in legal challenges. Wakefield received over
half a million pounds from legal aid funds to find that evidence. He had also developed his own alternative vaccines and stood to make a fortune if the MMR vaccine was replaced. The children in the study had been recruited from groups already campaigning against the MMR vaccine. The researched procedures had not been put through the hospital ethics committee and the children were subjected to a range of intrusive procedures. Finally, the scientific data did not match the reports that Wakefield made.

It would be difficult to find a more comprehensive moral and ethical breach than this. What is even more remarkable is that some newspapers carried on ignoring the true facts and continued to support the anti-MMR vaccine campaign. There are issues about media ethics here, but that discussion is for another book.

**HM**

An entirely different story and one that raises some different ethical issues concerns the case of Henry Molaison, who is usually referred to as HM. Molaison died in 2008 after a lifetime of being an unknowing subject of psychological studies. The case study appears in most introductory psychology texts and concerns a man who lost the ability to remember information after a brain operation. HM is very famous in psychology and ‘… he has probably had more words written about him than any other case in neurological or psychological history’ (Ogden & Corkin, 1991, p. 195).

HM (he was always given those initials in scientific reports to protect his identity, although that might seem ironic after you read about what the psychologists did to him) was born in 1926 and had a head injury at the age of 7 that started a lifetime of epileptic seizures. These seizures got worse over the years and in his mid-20s he was having uncontrolled grand mal attacks (health-threatening seizures). It was proposed to attempt a brain operation to cure the epilepsy and a surgeon called William Scoville performed a ‘bilateral medial temporal lobe resection’ (cutting out a part of HM’s brain). On the positive side, HM survived the operation and his epilepsy became less damaging, but on the very negative side he had profound retrograde and anterograde amnesia. More precisely, he had lost much of his memory for the 10 years prior to the operation (retrograde amnesia), and even more damagingly he had lost the ability to store new information (anterograde amnesia). He had about a 90-second memory span, so he was effectively waking up every 90 seconds not knowing where he was or whom he was talking to.
The operation on HM was not the first time this procedure had been carried out and the results could have been reasonably expected. The surgeon had been pioneering this technique on psychiatric patients and knew the likely consequences. Why he carried it out is not clear but there are numerous other ethical issues here about the conduct of doctors and their monitoring by colleagues. For an interesting and readable account of this study you can do no better than to look at Memory’s Ghost by Philip Hilts (1996).

The operation was clearly a disaster for HM, although he probably never understood that because he could never learn what happened to him, or if he did he would forget it within a couple of minutes. This was a tragedy for HM but an opportunity for any psychologists who became aware of the case. They queued up to study HM’s memory, assessing it with all kinds of tests and checking out a wide range of hypotheses concerning the theoretical distinctions between long-term and short-term memory, and between explicit and implicit memory. They used all sorts of stimuli, including electric shocks and white noise (for a review, see: Corkin, 1984; Parkin, 1996). One of ‘the most striking characteristics is that he rarely complains about anything … is always agreeable and co-operative to the point that if … asked to sit in a particular place he will do so indefinitely’ (Corkin, 1984, p. 251).

The tests continued for 40 years until HM was in his late 60s and his mental faculties were starting to show a general deterioration. One of the psychologists wrote of the major contribution this work had made to our understanding of memory and commented ‘… the fact that he has no conscious memory of this work does not in any way detract from the debt we owe him’ (Ogden & Corkin, 1991, p. 195).

The story of HM is commonly presented without comment in psychology books but ask yourself this: How did HM give consent for the 40 years of constant research and experimentation? He did not know what was being done to him or even who was doing it. Is this ground-breaking science or cruel exploitation of a man whose life has been ruined by experimental brain surgery? His brain is now kept at the University of California, San Diego, USA and sliced up into sections. Who agreed to this?

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### KEY TERMS

**Explicit and implicit memory** A way to classify different kinds of memory, distinguishing between memories of which we are aware (explicit) and those memories which are outside our conscious awareness (implicit).

**Ethical issues** arise in research where there are conflicts between the research goals and the participant’s rights.

**Informed consent** The agreement given by an individual to participate in a research study or any program, based on comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of the study or program and their role in it. This is necessary in order that they can make an informed decision about whether to participate.
Ethical issues

These two cases highlight some central ethical issues.

1 First of all is the issue of **informed consent**, which refers to the idea that any participant in an experiment should be informed about what the research entails and asked formally to consent to take part. This basic human right was first recognized by the Nuremberg trials. During the Second World War (1939–1945), Nazi doctors conducted various experiments on prisoners. For example, the doctors tested the prisoners' reactions to fatal diseases such as typhoid, and to extreme temperatures by immersing them in freezing water to see how long it would take for them to die. After the war a 10-point code (The Nuremberg Code; see Box 1.1) was produced and this has formed the basis for many contemporary ethical codes in both medical and behavioral research.

2 The second issue is the one of **costs versus benefits**. All researchers believe that their research offers potential benefits and they recognize that there are certain costs. The difficulty is in assessing the benefits and costs, and then deciding whether the research is justified. In the case of medical research it is easier to assess benefits but, as we will see, this is much harder in the behavioral sciences because the potential benefits to others are less easy to define. These issues are explored again in Chapter 2.

3 A third issue is the modern expectation that scientists treat all people with respect and take all reasonable steps to **protect their welfare**. If we see some people as less important than others, then it might seem OK to experiment on them so that the more important people can have some benefit. The war-time experimentation was carried out on people who were regarded as less worthy of respect. We have to acknowledge that even today we do not grant all people

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**BOX 1.1 The Nuremberg Code (1946)**

1 The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential.
2 The experiment should yield fruitful results for the good of society that cannot be obtained by other means.
3 The experiment should be based on previous research so that the anticipated results can justify the research.
4 All unnecessary physical and mental suffering should be avoided.
5 No experiment should be conducted where there is reason to believe that death or disabling injury may be the result.
6 The degree of risk should also be less than the potential humanitarian importance of the research.
7 Adequate precautions should be in place to protect the subjects against any possible injury.
8 Experiments should only be conducted by qualified persons.
9 The human subject should always be at liberty to end the experiment.
10 The scientist in charge should be prepared to terminate any experiment if there is probable cause to believe that continuation is likely to result in injury or death.

[Adapted from Katz, 1972]
equal respect. For example, in the UK we are happy to buy branded sports clothing that is made in the developing world under working conditions that would not be tolerated in our own country. This can only be based on the underlying belief that the welfare of Indonesian children is not as important as British children.

What are ethics?

It all starts with morals, which are rules to guide our behavior. They are based on a number of socially agreed principles that are used to develop clear and logical guidelines to direct behavior. They also contain ideas about what is good and what is desirable in human behavior. Ethics are a moral framework that is applied to a narrow group of people such as doctors, or maybe a particular religion, or even psychologists.

There are a number of terms that we ought to consider in order to try to make sense of them. They do not have clear-cut definitions so the definitions we decide to use might be a little different from some other books.

We start with morals, which are ‘concerned with or relating to human behavior, especially the distinction between good and bad or right and wrong behavior’ (Source: The Collins English Dictionary © 2000 HarperCollins Publishers).

From morals we move on to ethics. This term has two meanings: one is ‘a social, religious, or civil code of behavior considered correct, especially that of a particular group, profession, or individual’ and the other is ‘the philosophical study of the moral value of human conduct and of the rules and principles that ought to govern it; moral philosophy’ (both definitions from The Collins English Dictionary © 2000 HarperCollins Publishers). If you took an ethics course at university you would probably be more concerned with the second definition, but for the basis of a psychology course we are mostly concerned with the first definition: the code of conduct that psychologists use to regulate their professional behavior.

When we look at ethics for psychologists we might start off by stating some principles that form the basis for our ethical judgements. From these principles we might develop some guidelines for behavior or maybe a code of conduct. When we try to use these ethical principles and guidelines we sometimes have to wrestle with ethical issues that arise because of conflict between one ethical issue and another.

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The distinctions between all these terms are not clear cut – one person’s issue might be another person’s principle. The various organizations that develop codes of ethics use the terms in different ways: for example the American Psychological Association (2002b) refers to an ‘Ethics Code’ whereas the British Psychological Society (2009b) refers to ‘Ethical principles for conducting research with human participants’ and ‘Guidelines for psychologists working with animals’.

The labels are not that important but the debate is. It is all about right and wrong, good and bad and the way that we choose to conduct our lives. What can be more important than that?

**Consequences, actions, character and motives**

The ethics of a behavior can be judged using four categories: actions, consequences, character and motives (Daeg de Mott, 2001). When we look at consequences, we judge whether a behavior is right or wrong by looking at the result of the behavior (see Figure 1.1). If it leads to a result that brings about an improvement for someone’s life, we might think it is a good thing. When we look at the actions, however, we look at the act itself, and consider what the person is doing. The category of character is concerned with whether the person is a good (or virtuous) person who is generally ethical. When we look at motives, we are concerned with the intentions of the person carrying out the behavior, and we consider whether they were trying to do something good.

Figure 1.1 Judging right and wrong

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Nothing is clear cut in the study of ethics and these categories sometimes give us different assessments. The puzzle is to decide whether you think the behavior is ethical or not.

**REFLECTIVE EXERCISE 1.1**

Look at the four criteria for making moral decisions shown in Figure 1.1, and then see how you can apply these to the following two examples. Do this before reading our view of this.

**Example 1**  
Rapoff (1980) used an ammonia spray to punish a deaf–blind 5-year-old boy who was engaging in serious self-injurious behavior (self-mutilation), and in so doing reduced the amount of self-harmful behavior.

**Example 2**  
Your government decides to go to war. The most controversial recent military engagement by the USA and UK’s forces was the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and a debate is still raging about whether we should have gone in. Everyone (well, nearly everyone) is against war in principle, but the issue is whether in practice this war was necessary or right.

**Reflective Exercise Example 1: Therapy**

Rapoff (1980) used an ammonia spray to punish a deaf–blind 5-year-old boy who was engaging in serious self-injurious behavior (self-mutilation), and in so doing reduced the amount of self-harmful behavior.

This sounds a shocking thing to do and many of you will immediately decide that this treatment is unethical but we are going to argue the opposite. The consequence of this action, if it is successful, is that the boy will have a better quality of life. The act does not look to be a good thing, but we might well judge the motives of the therapist to be sound because they want to help the child. Depending on what we believe about therapists in general or what we know about Rapoff in particular, we can make an assessment of character and decide whether we trust them to do the right thing. Considering that there are no easy solutions when dealing with very challenging children and that this solution at least avoids the use of medication, one might be inclined to judge this as an ethical treatment. Feel free to disagree.

**Reflective Exercise Example 2: War**

Your government decides to go to war. The most controversial recent military engagement by the USA and UK’s forces was the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and a debate is still raging about whether we should have gone in. Everyone (well, nearly everyone) is against war in principle, but the issue is whether in practice this war was necessary or right.
The same four categories structure the debate. The consequence of the action is used as an ethical justification for the war. The removal of a murderous government is generally seen as a good thing, although history will be the final judge of this. The act of war itself is generally seen as bad because of the chaos, loss of life and general destruction that it brings. The bitterest part of the argument concerns character and motives. The US and UK governments argue that their motive for action was honorable and humanitarian, but some see their actions as being led by commercial interests such as the control of oil. The key issue for many in the UK is their assessment of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s character. If you largely trusted him to do the right thing then you might have gone along, however reluctantly, with the decision to go to war with Iraq and continue to see it as morally justifiable.

REFLECTIVE EXERCISE 1.2

Think of your own example of something that has been publically debated as right or wrong, for example using capital punishment for people who kill other people.

● Is it ever morally right to kill another person?
● If you think it is, give some examples of killing that might be justified.
● Is it right to use the death penalty if one person kills another?
● If you think it is, give some examples of when it would be justified and also some when it would not. For example, what if a police officer kills someone in the line of duty, or an ambulance driver kills someone in a road accident, or a drunk driver kills someone in a road accident?

Use the four categories of consequences, actions, character and motives to decide on the ethics of these behaviors.

Absolute and relative morals

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to solving moral dilemmas. Either you take the view that morals are absolute or that they are relative. The ‘absolute’ view is that some things are simply right or wrong. The absolutist position corresponds to common traditional views of morality, particularly of a religious kind – what might be called the ‘Ten Commandments’ idea of morality: for example, ‘thou shalt not steal’.

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Relativists, on the other hand, believe that all morals are dependent on context so, for example, they argue that there are situations where stealing is acceptable. The intrinsic ‘wrongness’ of an act may be overridden by other considerations: for example, it might be acceptable for a father to steal food because his children are starving.

As ever in these debates between two extreme positions, the common response is somewhere between the two. Most people who tend towards absolutism will allow for special circumstances and bend the rules on special occasions, while those who favor relativism are still likely to admit to some universal standards that form a ‘bottom line’ of behavior.

It is the generally held view in the UK that we should respect other people’s property and not steal, but despite expressing morals near the absolutist end, many people behave in a relativist way. For example, most people will not go into a local media store and steal CDs, and the reason they may give for this is that they do not think it is right to steal. They might then go home, however, and log on to a peer-to-peer

**BOX 1.2 Moral perspectives**

Along the continuum of absolute–relative there are a number of moral perspectives. The deontological perspective (e.g. Immanuel Kant) holds that there are things that are intrinsically right or wrong but there may be exceptional circumstances that can override this position. It is largely an absolutist position. Deontological ethics emphasize universal imperatives such as moral laws, duties, obligations, prohibitions, and so on (sometimes this is also called ‘imperativism’).

Ethical relativism is the view that ethical judgements are true or false only relative to a particular context. So if I say that eating people is wrong, while you say it is right, we may both be speaking the truth. For cannibalism may be wrong in my context and right in yours. Morals are relative to historical or cultural contexts.

Utilitarianism (e.g. John Stuart Mill) says simply that an action is right or wrong depending upon its consequences, such as its effects on society (sometimes this is also called ‘consequentialism’). An act is good or moral if it produces the greatest well-being for everyone affected by it. The cost–benefit approach taken by most ethical codes is based on this idea of consequences or utility.
site and download music to download onto their own ipods. This is theft just as much as swiping CDs from the media store. The reasons given for this theft might be that 'the record companies charge too much for music and are exploiting us', which would suggest high moral principles, or 'I won't get caught', which suggests that morals are determined by reward and punishment.

Another example is the act of telling lies. Most of us would say that we are truthful people who are not liars. But be honest, you give information to people every day that is not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Some of these untruths are acts of politeness or support: for example, ‘of course you don’t look fat in that’, or ‘I’m sure nobody noticed you farting in the middle of the lecture’. Sometimes the untruths serve our own interests: for example, ‘I’d love to come to your party but I’ve got to visit my nan’. We are not really liars, it is just that we do not tell the truth all the time.

It is very difficult to keep to an absolutist line, even though we try. As a result it is very easy to call someone a hypocrite because they appear to be doing something that they do not believe in. See Box 1.2 for more discussion of the relativist–absolutist debate.

Rights and values

Many people claim that there is a ‘right to work’ or a ‘right to good health care’ or a ‘right to have children’, but what are ‘rights’? This is more controversial than you might think. It depends, in part, on where you think rights come from. According to Fukuyama (2001) there are three lines of argument about the source of rights: divine rights, natural rights or rights from custom and practice. In other words, rights can come from God, or from nature or from human beings.

In a religious society, the rights are seen to come from the God of that society, and are commonly written in a holy book and interpreted by religious scholars. If we do not believe in divine rights we might argue that rights come from the second source – nature – and that we should look at human nature to see what people are capable of and what can be viewed as right or wrong. The issue here is to describe human nature and to say what parts of our behavior are inevitable and what parts are created by the world we live in. This is clearly tricky
because the world we live in has been created by ourselves and so we can end up in a circular argument – society affects the behavior of people but people affect the structure of society. It is also not a popular argument with liberals because the study of human nature can give us an uncomfortable picture of ourselves as selfish, murderous and xenophobic.

The third possible source of human rights is human beings themselves. The executive director of Amnesty International, William F. Schulz, argues that human rights should not be concerned with human nature but with the things ‘human beings possess or can claim’ (Schulz, 2000), or, in other words, human rights are anything we agree them to be. An example of this approach is the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948; see Box 1.3 and Figure 1.2). This was a political document written to keep both the United States and the Soviet Union happy at a time when the Cold War conflict was just beginning. If you read through it you will find some absurdities such as Article 24, which states we have a right to ‘periodic holidays with pay’. In a world where less than half of the population have paid employment, this is nonsense. And what about Article 19, the right to freedom of expression? This sounds fine and dandy, but

Figure 1.2 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, hot off the press in 1948. © the UN.

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BOX 1.3  An outline of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude

Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7. All are equal before the law.

Article 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal.

Article 11. Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty.

Article 12. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation.

Article 13. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

Article 14. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

Article 15. Everyone has the right to a nationality.

Article 16. Men and women of full age have the right to marry and to found a family. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

Article 17. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Article 19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
Article 20. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

Article 21. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections.

Article 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security.

Article 23. Everyone has the right to work.

Article 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance.

Article 26. Everyone has the right to free education. Elementary education shall be compulsory.

Article 27. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Article 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

Article 30. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Extracted with permission of the UN.

in the UK we are (rightly, we believe) forbidden from freely expressing racist views. And if you say that the Holocaust did not happen then you can be sent to prison. In this case, rights are not absolute principles.

Since 1948 people have been enthusiastically adding rights to the list. It has become a wish list that has no end. Some of the new ‘rights’ highlight the difficulty of this process. If you consider the idea of ‘animal rights’, then you can see the problem. We would not want an animal
to suffer unnecessarily, but does it have a right to that (a topic we will discuss in Chapter 5)? A lot of animal suffering will be caused by other animals. Lions chase zebras, cats chase birds, birds eat spiders, and so on. The issue is about human behavior towards animals rather than the rights of the animals.

What about our consumer behavior? Does a right to shop cut across the rights of other people? We might largely agree with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights but find we are compromising it by our choice of products. For example, if you choose to wear branded sports clothing it is likely that it was made in a developing world sweat shop where people are forced to work long hours without holidays and without reasonable pay. Their basic human rights (according to the UN charter, Articles 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 20, 24, 25) are not being fulfilled.

In 1998 the UK signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights and we now have the Human Rights Act as part of the law of the land. If you want to know more about this then you can visit the website given at the end of this chapter.

**Community or individual rights?**

A further issue with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is that it is largely about individual rights rather than community rights. So I might want to freely express hateful ideas, and as an individual it is my right to do so, but it cuts across the rights of the community to live in relative harmony and to be free from harassment.

The government of China locks up a large number of political dissidents but it can argue that, for Chinese society, individual rights are less important than collective and social rights. They might well favor the notion that ‘the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few’ (Spock – closing speech in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*). It can be argued that human rights are largely a Western idea and we use them to claim the high moral ground while we continue trying to dominate the rest of the world.

What about the disputes related to the wearing of religious dress? The burka is a garment worn by some Muslim women that covers most of their body and face and means that other people cannot recognize them. Some European countries may restrict where this form of dress can be worn. The individual has a clear ‘right’ to be able to wear what they feel is appropriate and the community also has a ‘right’ to feel safe and to be able to identify other people.

It is a real problem and there are no easy answers here because negotiating and agreeing on how we should behave is a very difficult
process. It is difficult enough agreeing who should do the washing up in the house, so coming to an agreement on how we should behave in society is almost impossible. The fact that we manage to largely agree on a code that allows the relative smooth running of our world is remarkable. The discussion about how we should behave towards each other is one that can never end, and each generation has to re-establish how it believes we should live. This means that the discussions about rights and morals and ethics must always be open. And this is what makes them ‘issues’ – there are conflicting values and we have no simple answers.

Developing morals and being moral

How do we develop our morals?

In the above examples we have considered whether something is right or wrong and we can see this as a moral debate. Morals are something that everyone has and uses to govern their everyday behavior. When we say that someone has no morals, we do not mean that they have no rules that govern their behavior but that they are using a different moral code from ourselves.

We start developing our sense of right and wrong from a very early age and over the course of our lives we structure our behavior by a moral code. Sometimes we break our own code but by and large people live by rules that make much of their behavior predictable and socially acceptable. This moral code is rarely written down or put up for discussion.

The term ‘ethics’, on the other hand, is commonly used to refer to a specific set of rules or guidelines that have been developed by a particular group of people, such as doctors, solicitors or psychologists. These rules are affected by the moral code of the society these people work in. Morals, and therefore ethical codes, are affected by culture and so change from one culture to another and from one period of time to another.

A number of psychologists have written about how we learn right from wrong and how we develop our personal moral code. Some might see it as a matter of learning which behavior gets rewarded and which gets punished. This is a behaviorist account of morals. Some psychologists make a psychoanalytic explanation and look at

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**KEY TERMS**

**Behaviorist** The view that all behavior can be explained in terms of learning theory (classical and operant conditioning), referring only to the behaviors themselves rather than any internal mechanisms in order to explain behavior.

**Psychoanalytic** Freud’s explanation of how adult personality develops as a consequence of the interaction between biological (sexual) drives and early experience.

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how the child internalizes the personality of their parents.

The most commonly described theories in introductory texts are the cognitive developmental accounts that emphasize how we think through problems to arrive at our judgement. The work of Kohlberg (1978), for example, looks at how children develop their ability to reason as they mature. He argues that as we mature we move from morals based on self-interest to morals based on principles. At the earliest level (pre-conventional) children defer to adults and obey rules to gain rewards or avoid punishments. At the next level (conventional) their behavior is guided by the opinions of other people and by the desire to conform. In the highest level (post-conventional) behavior is guided by abstract moral principles that go beyond the laws of society. Our choice of moral code will affect our personal response to an ethical code.

Legal requirements and professional standards

Ethical guidelines are not legal requirements. A person cannot be sent to prison if they infringe the ethical code of their professional group but they may be punished by their peers and/or debarred from practicing as a professional. One of the distinguishing features of any professional group is its commitment to be self-regulating and to police its ethical standards. Having said that, it has to be acknowledged that professional groups in the UK are very reluctant to act against any of their members. The General Medical Council (GMC) rarely strikes off a doctor even when gross misconduct has been established, and doctors who behave badly commonly receive only a censure. It can also be argued that psychologists commonly break their own code without being censured, but we will come on to that later. And as for teachers – they have chosen not to regulate their own profession at all.

Some aspects of ethical/moral behavior are policed by the law of the land. For example, the death of anyone is subject to legal scrutiny, so even the GMC had to remove British GP Harold Shipman from its register of practitioners after police established that he had murdered nearly 300 of his patients. You might argue that if the GMC

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had monitored his behavior and responded to his drug abuse and to the complaints made against him then the tragedy might not have happened (Ramsey, 2001).

The use of animals in research is controlled by legislation (e.g. The Animal Act of 1986) and the testing of drugs in research is also controlled. More recently legislation for stem cell research has been put in place. Any researcher who breaks these laws may be punished like any other criminal (e.g. fines, probation, custodial sentence), and their work stopped.

**Principles, guidelines and issues**

Many groups of people go beyond legal requirements to develop ethical principles (the moral values that are applied to their particular interests) and the guidelines or code of practice that is developed from these principles. Some sports people have an ethical code: for example, in golf it is unheard of for professional golfers to try to cheat. This is not the same for all sports: ‘gamesmanship’ or cheating (such as ‘going to ground’ or diving as some people might call it) is seen as fair game in professional football.

So the principles inform our guidelines and hence our behavior, but sometimes these principles create a conflict that leads to ethical issues. It is worth noting that there are very few right and wrong answers to ethical questions because we have to come to our own conclusions based on our own morals and our own interpretation of the ethical guidelines we are trying to follow.

**Why study ethics?**

It is one of the more difficult areas of psychology to study because there are no clear answers. That might well make it one of the more interesting areas for you, or one of the most frustrating. If there are no clear answers it means that you have the opportunity to develop and express your own opinion. As teachers of psychology we find it interesting to watch the development of ethical opinions in our students. Our own opinions have been changed by these debates. When one of the authors (PB) started teaching psychology some of the studies that were commonly used to illustrate psychological research involved cruel and distressing treatments on animals. I told my students about these without much thought. Over the years I found that students became more and more critical of these studies.
and after some (belated) thought I decided to drop most of them from my teaching and only use the remaining ones with very strong health warnings.

The study of ethics allows us to reflect on our own behavior and so change it for the better. It also allows us to reflect on the behavior of psychologists, to give a better understanding of the subject and, pragmatically, to give us some great evaluative points for essays.

In the rest of this book we will look further at ethical issues and ethical guidelines. Ethics are often used in a very narrow way in psychology to assess how we carry out our research but there are some wider ethical issues to consider alongside the practical guidelines. We will also consider the issues around using animals in psychological research. Finally we will consider the conduct of psychologists and the ways in which they continue to behave in ethically dubious ways.

Summary

In this chapter we have considered morals, rights and ethical issues. Morals are judgements of right and wrong in human behavior. It is not always easy to work out what is right and wrong, and this gives rise to moral issues. There are no absolutes in the area of moral behavior – but people have attempted to establish certain universal rights. Ethics are the morals of a professional group, and ethical guidelines or principles are established as a means of helping to resolve the ethical issues that arise. In ethics, as in morals, there are often dilemmas about what is clearly right or clearly wrong.

FURTHER READING


http://www.psypress.com/ethical-issues-in-psychology-9780415429887
WEBSITES

- Ben Goldacre’s take on the MMR myth:
  www.badscience.net/2008/08/the-medias-mmr-hoax/
- Brian Deer’s review of the MMR story:
  http://briandeer.com/mmr/lancet-summary.htm
- Human Rights Act:
- New York Times obituary for HM:
  www.nytimes.com/2008/12/05/us/05hm.html?r=1&pagewanted=1&em
- United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights: