

3-2 Ethics in the context of psychological research

Before we look at the arguments that swirled around the obedience study we need to consider what we mean by ethics. It all starts with *morals*, which are rules to guide our behaviour. These rules are based on a number of socially agreed principles which are used to develop clear and logical guidelines to direct behaviour. They also contain ideas about what is good and desirable in human behaviour. *Ethics*, in the context of psychological research, refers to a moral framework that governs what psychologists can and cannot do.

The first generally accepted code of ethics for research on humans was devised in 1947 as a response to the very events that provoked Milgram's research. During the Second World War (1939–45), under the Nazi regime, research was carried out on human beings that led to many deaths, deformities and long-term injuries. Revelations about this research were as great a shock for the post-war world as the death camps, because these acts of brutality and murder were conducted by doctors and scientists.

After the war the victors held a series of trials, in the German city of Nuremberg, of people who had taken part in the worst excesses of the horrors that had swept across Europe. Among them were twenty-three doctors involved in the brutal experiments. Sixteen of them were found guilty, of whom seven were sentenced to death. Significantly, the judgement included a statement about how scientists should behave when experimenting on other humans. This is referred to as the Nuremberg Code (see Table 1) and it became the basis for future ethical codes in medicine and psychology.

Table 1 The Nuremberg Code (1946) (Source: adapted from Katz, 1972, pp. 305–6)

- 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

Four key principles emerged from the Nuremberg Code:

First principle - Participants must be able to give informed consent to the procedure.

Second principle - They must retain the *right to withdraw* from the study whenever they want.

Third principle - The *welfare of the participant* must be protected wherever possible.

Fourth principle - This is the most difficult to interpret because it concerns the *costs and benefits* of the study. It says that any risks to the participants must be greatly outweighed by the possible benefits for the greater good.

