

“Reality” TV and Ethical Research

Ethics is an important consideration in any type of psychological research. The average person on the street is unaware of the amount of time and effort that is put into any research proposal. If the research is being conducted by a psychologist at a university, the research proposal typically goes through two levels of review (departmental and institutional) before it is approved. Only after final approval can the research be conducted. This assignment will allow students the opportunity to learn more about the American Psychological Association’s (APA) research guidelines for humans. In addition, students will be asked to think about the state of ethics in American society, specifically reality television shows.

Directions. Read the following articles:

- “Reality Check” (<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/getArticle.cfm?id=1742>)
- “Could Reality Shows Become Reality Experiments?” (<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/getArticle.cfm?id=1743>).

Questions to Answer:

All answers must be in your own words.

1. Based upon what you learned from the articles, why do people watch reality TV shows?
2. Some reality TV shows (e.g., Survivor and Big Brother) break contestants into competing teams. Sometimes these rival teams have to work together for a common goal. What are the similarities and difference between these types of reality TV shows and the results of the Robber’s Cave research discussed in the textbook?
3. Do you believe that ethical standards similar to those of the APA should be applied to reality-based television shows? Why or why not?
4. What kind of concerns about the participants’ psychological well-being should be considered during the development phase of these shows?
5. Some people argue that whatever kinds of psychological hardships the show’s participants experience is acceptable because they are “doing it for the money” and they agreed to undertake the experience. Do you feel this argument is valid? Why or why not?
6. Select a reality TV show and watch at least one episode. (Alternatively, some reality TV shows have websites where you can watch video clips or read synopses of the episodes.) Determine whether or not you believe this show would be ethical if it were a psychological experiment. Use the “Could Reality Shows Become Reality Experiments?” article as an example. Please avoid using any of the shows described in the article. If you really want to use one of these shows you must do a much more in-depth analysis of the show’s ethicality because the article has already presented an analysis. Use the summary of the APA’s ethical guidelines on the next page as a framework for the ethical considerations you should consider in your evaluation.

Summary of the APA's Ethical Guidelines for Research with Humans

1. Participation in research should be voluntary and potential subjects should be provided with enough information to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. Subjects should be told about possible physical and/or psychological effects of their participation and that they are free to quit the research study at any time.
2. Research studies should protect participants from harmful procedures or conditions. A moderate level of psychological discomfort is acceptable if participants are informed of this possibility before agreeing to participate and the discomfort is deemed acceptable by an institutional review board.
3. If a research study involves deceiving participants about the true purpose of the study or about its procedures, the researchers must explain this deception to participants as soon as possible. (Typically this explanation—debriefing—occurs at the conclusion of the study.) There cannot be deception about the risks involved in the study.
4. Any information collected about an individual research participant must be kept in strict confidence unless the participant has given written permission that allows sharing of this information.
5. Before any research is conducted, it must receive approval by the appropriate institutional review board(s) to determine its merits (e.g., “Is the research really necessary?”) and ethicality.