

Ethical Analysis of Developmental Research Vignettes Involving Children

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PSY-7120 v2: Overview of the Psychological Concepts (9187202574)

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July 19, 2025

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Psychological research involving children (Montreuil, et al., 2021) presents unique ethical challenges that require adherence to the highest standards of care, respect, and protection. The American Psychological Association (2017) outlines specific Ethical Standards to guide psychologists in avoiding harm, preserving autonomy, and ensuring justice for vulnerable populations, including minors. While informed parental consent is assumed and reported as such by National University in each of the following fictional vignettes, ethical breaches persist across the world by practitioners and researchers. Deka and Deka (2021) argue that ethical misconduct is inevitably brought to light, regardless of initial concealment. This paper analyzes potential violations in each case, focusing on Standards from the American Psychological Association's Code of Conduct (2017), developmental vulnerabilities, and sociocultural considerations, while offering mitigation strategies for ethical improvements.

Vignette #1: The Strange Situation Procedure

“A 12 month-old infant and her mother are ushered into the research playroom by a smiling lab assistant. After a few minutes of instructions, the two are left alone for the beginning of a 21-minute procedure designed to appraise the security of their attachment relationship. During the period, another female researcher enters the room on two occasions to play with the baby. The mother also leaves the room on two occasions – once leaving the baby in the company of a female researcher, and a second time leaving the child alone. The baby's behavior throughout the procedure is observed via a one-way mirror, especially the reactions to the stranger and the separations from and reunions with the mother” (Thompson, 1990, p. 1). This vignette mirrors the classic strange situation protocol used in attachment research (Madigan et al., 2023). Though informed consent was obtained, the following ethical concerns are evident:

1. Violation of Standard 3.04: Avoiding Harm. Leaving a 12-month-old infant alone in an unfamiliar setting can induce distress, anxiety, or emotional trauma, particularly when separated from a primary caregiver. The American Psychological Association's mandates that psychologists take reasonable steps to avoid causing harm (American Psychological Association, 2017, Standard 3.04).

2. Violation of Standard 8.07: Deception in Research. While the child is too young to comprehend the procedure, the use of a stranger to elicit responses uses deceptive practice. The child is unaware that the stranger's presence is controlled and not organically occurring (American Psychological Association, 2017, Standard 8.07).

Cultural Considerations: Attachment behaviors and parenting practices vary across cultures. In collectivist cultures, communal caregiving may buffer separation anxiety, while individualist cultures may perceive greater distress. Cultural differences in attachment styles are closely linked to depressive symptoms (Wang, Jin, et al., 2022). Mitigation Strategies:

Researchers could reduce harm by shortening separations, using video simulations, or observing infants in naturalistic settings. Debriefing parents and maintaining adult presence are crucial.

Parenting styles and attachment are deeply shaped by cultural norms and expectations (Waite-Jones & Rodriguez, 2022).

Vignette #2: Puzzle Task and Self-Evaluation

"A 9-year-old boy enters the empty school classroom with the researcher who had been introduced to him just moments before. After a few minutes of getting acquainted, the researcher tells the boy that she is interested in his speed at completing jigsaw puzzles and gives him a puzzle to complete. He does so quickly and receives her admiration and praise in return. She then

gives him four more puzzles, and for each one he is surprised to find that he is unable to finish it in the time provided. The researcher then asks him some questions about how he evaluates his abilities and efforts in completing puzzles, in finishing schoolwork, and in other areas of achievement. Before he leaves, she notes that the four puzzles were designed to be difficult to solve, so he should not feel bad about his performance” (Thompson, 1990, p. 1). This study examines achievement motivation through puzzle completion. Two ethical violations include:

1. Violation of Standard 8.07: Deception in Research: The child is intentionally given unsolvable tasks without prior knowledge. Deception must be justified and not harmful. The child’s self-esteem may suffer (American Psychological Association, 2017, Standard 8.07).

2. Violation of Standard 3.10: Informed Consent: While parental consent was secured, the child wasn’t adequately informed. Ethical standards require a developmentally appropriate explanation and child assent (American Psychological Association, 2017, Standard 3.10).

Tricking an innocent minor is not endorsed or allowed.

Cultural Considerations: Different cultures place varied emphasis on academic success. Some may experience more distress due to cultural expectations of achievement. Cena, et al. (2021) explored how international students experience belonging and intercultural dynamics in academic settings. Mitigation Strategies: Marici, et al. (2024) found that positive reinforcement used within assertive communication led to more favorable responses to chores among children. Provide a clear explanation, positive reinforcement, ensure emotional support, and use robust debriefing. Positive reinforcement and discussion about effort versus ability are helpful.

Vignette #3: Adolescent Girl and Body Image Questionnaire

“A 13-year-old girl is observed from behind one-way windows while she plays with the young baby who had been presented to her when she arrived at the laboratory. After this 30-minute observational session, she is then escorted to an adjoining room where she completes several questionnaires concerning her personality, background, interests, and other characteristics. Among these questionnaires is one in which she is asked to indicate the development of her secondary sexual characteristics by marking which of a series of photographs is most similar to her own breast size, pubic hair growth, and other physical features” (Thompson, 1990, p. 2). This vignette reveals serious ethical issues related to privacy and development:

1. Violation of Standard 4.01: Maintaining Confidentiality: Asking a minor to compare her body to images of sexual characteristics is highly invasive and may shame or distress her without strict confidentiality (American Psychological Association, 2017, Standard 4.01). I found this narrative to be filthy, disgusting, and highly outrageous to consider. The exploration of filing an Ethics Committee Formal Complaint and meeting with family office General Counsel to review potential criminal/civil code violations came to my mind. I would like to see a thorough review of that.

2. Violation of Standard 3.10 and 3.08: Informed Consent and Exploitation: The questionnaire may exceed what's developmentally appropriate. APA guidelines prohibit exploitation or use of power differentials to gain compliance (American Psychological Association, 2017, Standard 3.10 and 3.08).

Cultural Considerations: Adolescents from conservative backgrounds may be more distressed. Gender norms and modesty vary by culture (Liang, 2024). Sharing sexual content can

lead to severe social and psychological consequences for girls in conservative societies (Azimi, et al., 2024). Liang (2024) illustrates how cultural expectations around modesty can shape individual experiences, particularly in conservative communities. Mitigation Strategies: Use anonymous, age-appropriate assessments. Offer private, respectful debriefings and provide opt-out options.

Conclusion

Despite parental consent, the vignettes show ethical shortcomings related to harm, deception, consent, and cultural awareness. Ethical child research must emphasize transparency, respect, and dignity. Future research should minimize deception, prioritize consent, inform subjects better, and incorporate inclusive design to protect minors.

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