

The following sample is a response to the learning objective: *Explain one ethical consideration related to one research study at the socio-cultural level of analysis.*

### What is the question asking for?

- One ethical consideration should be clearly identified and explained.
- One study from the sociocultural level of analysis should be used to illustrate the ethical consideration.
- A link should be explicitly made between the ethical consideration and the study.



### Sample response

Though it is not absolutely necessary, it would be better for this SAQ to begin with a direct response to the question. One ethical consideration at the SCLOA is....

Deception has been identified as the ethical consideration.

Aim of study is clearly stated.

A satisfactory description of the study.

The ethical consideration is linked to the level of analysis and the use of deception is explained.

The problems with deception are outlined.

Further justification of the use of deception.

A very good finish. How should this decision be made.

At the socio-cultural level of analysis, a research method that may be used is observation. An observation could be overt, where the participants know that they are being observed; or it could be covert, where they are unaware that they are being observed. A covert observation was used in a study by Festinger. In his Domsday Cult study, Festinger used a covert observation which involves deceiving participants. This is a serious ethical consideration. In his study, Festinger and his colleagues infiltrated a doomsday cult because they wanted to see how the people would react when their prophecy that the world would end, did not come true. They joined the cult pretending to be "believers," but they were actually observing the cult members. They took notes on a daily basis regarding the conversations that they had with cult members, as well as describing their behaviour. When the final day came and nothing happened, the cult members suddenly found themselves justifying their behaviour to lower their sense of shame and cognitive dissonance. The cult members rationalized that their prayers had postponed the doomsday.

The SCLOA studies group behaviour. In order to make this as natural as possible, often people are observed "in the field." In order to do this without having them change their behaviour, deception may be used. Deception carries ethical concerns due to the fact that the people in the study are not aware of what is really going on; they are being tricked. They will feel that their trust was violated and they may experience extreme stress as a result. In spite of the deception, covert observations are highly effective in achieving obtaining data with high ecological validity and low demand characteristics. Furthermore, such as in this case with the cult, sometimes it is very difficult to obtain consent to observe a certain group or situation openly, so deception may be used to study the behaviour. The question is - to what extent is this research necessary? Is the harm caused by the deception worth the value of the findings? In the case of Festinger's classic study, this is rather debatable.

*A very strong response. Predicted full marks.*



**What are common problems with this question?**

- More than one ethical consideration is addressed. Remember, when more than one ethical consideration is addressed, only the first one is assessed.
- A study is not described with clear attention to the ethical consideration.
- Why the ethical consideration matters is not addressed.
- Why psychologists make the choice regarding the ethical consideration is not addressed.