Research Ethics

Learning Objectives

- Describe some of the historical events involving research projects that have raised questions about the protection of human subjects
- Identify the key ethical principles involved in conducting ethical research
- List current standards for the protection of human subjects in research
- Explain how an institutional review board operates and how it classifies research

The desire for recognition, the goal of making a difference, the lust for money, the certainty that we are right, and the difficulty of admitting weakness—none of these human failings disappear during the conduct of social research, nor are they expunged by years of advanced training. Of course, the same could be said about any human endeavor, as the latest headlines on corruption remind us, but perhaps social science bears a particularly heavy burden because its research questions can involve others’ lives and beliefs so directly. As a result, social science researchers must maintain high standards of ethical conduct and transparency to assure others that research methods and outcomes are not shaped by personal preference and self-interest. The best protection against biased outcomes and fraudulent conclusions is reliance on social science research methods, openness about procedures, and ongoing dialogue about results.

It is hard to overstate the importance of maintaining ethical standards in research, but it is easy to minimize the difficulty of doing so. Most social scientists and researchers in other fields behave ethically and use research methods honestly as a matter of personal principle and of collective commitment to the goal of scientific discovery. But evidence of dishonesty and outright fraud suggests that it is too common to ignore. A recent report estimates that one scientific paper is retracted every day due to misconduct, and a survey of scientists found that 2% admitted to improper alteration of their data (Marcus & Oransky 2015). Recent public cases make it clear that social science is far from immune to the problem.

In this chapter, you will learn about ethical standards for social science research and the cases that led to codification of these standards. The chapter also covers the specific procedures that colleges and universities use to enforce the standards and the consequences that have ensued when these standards have been violated. By the chapter’s end, you should be able to think about social research procedures from the standpoint of the research participants, who deserve as much respect for their well-being as do the social scientists conducting the research. You should also be aware of incentives to violating standards for ethical research and be ready to assess the extent to which the standards have been met in a particular research study.

Historical Background

The development of modern ethical standards for the treatment of research participants began in reaction to discovery of the unethical practices committed in the name of “science” by Nazis before and during World War II. In
1946, after the war, the Nuremberg War Crime Trials exposed horrific medical experiments conducted by Nazi doctors and others and convinced many observers that external standards and enforcement procedures were necessary. It was not until 15 years later, however, that psychologist Stanley Milgram's research on obedience generated a pitched debate about research ethics in the social sciences (Perry 2013:37). Ironically, Milgram's research was motivated in part by his desire to understand why ordinary people went along with the Nazis.

Participants recruited in 1960 from New Haven, Connecticut, for Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments came to a laboratory at Yale University and were asked to administer shocks to other participants who gave “wrong answers” as part of what they believed was a study of learning (see Photo 3.1).

The average level of shock administered by the 40 New Haven adults who volunteered for the experiment was 24.53—a level higher than what the dial indicated was Extreme Intensity Shock and just short of Danger: Severe Shock. Of Milgram’s original 40 subjects, 25 (62.5%) complied with the experimenter’s demands, all the way to the top of the scale (originally labeled simply as XXX). And lest you pass off this result as simply the result of the subjects having thought that the experiment wasn’t “real,” there is abundant evidence from the subjects’ own observed high stress and their subsequent reports that many subjects really believed that the learner was receiving actual, hurtful shocks (Exhibit 3.1).

Are you surprised by the subjects’ responses? Do you think the results of this experiment tell us about how people behave in the real world? We return to Milgram’s research later in the chapter to illustrate some key issues in research ethics.

As late as 1972, Americans learned from news reports that researchers funded by the U.S. Public Health Service had followed 399 low-income African American men in the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male since the 1930s, collecting data to study the “natural” course of the illness and claiming to potential participants that it was providing treatment (Exhibit 3.2). What made this research study, known as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, so shocking was that many participants were not informed of their illness and, even after penicillin was recognized as an effective treatment in 1945, the study participants were not treated (Tuskegee University 2015). Congressional hearings began in 1973, and an out-of-court settlement of $10 million was reached in 1974. President Bill Clinton made an official apology to African American citizens in 1997, for a study “so clearly racist, that can never be allowed to happen again” (CDC 2009; Washington 2006:184).

These and other widely publicized abuses made it clear that formal review procedures were needed to protect research participants. The U.S. government created a National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, and in 1979 its **Belmont Report** (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1979) established three basic ethical principles for the protection of human subjects (Kitchener & Kitchener 2009:7):

- **Respect for persons:** treating persons as autonomous agents and protecting those with diminished autonomy
- **Beneficence:** minimizing possible harms and maximizing benefits
- **Justice:** distributing benefits and risks of research fairly

A Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects was adopted in 1991 and has shaped the course of social science research ever since. Professional associations such as the American Sociological Association (ASA), university review boards, and ethics committees in other organizations may each add to these standards for the treatment of human subjects by their members, employees, and students.
Ethical Principles

Professional associations of social scientists develop codes of ethics that members are expected to adhere to in their research and other activities. For example, the Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association (1999) articulates general principles of competence, integrity, and responsibility as well as respect for the rights, dignity, and diversity of others, including research participants, and being socially responsible and using research to contribute to the public good. The following sections discuss the most important implications of such principles for the conduct of research, including the protection of human participants in research.

Achieving Valid Results

Commitment to achieving valid results is the necessary starting point for ethical research practice. Simply put, social researchers have no business asking people to answer questions, submit to observations, or participate in experimental procedures if they are simply seeking to verify preexisting prejudices or convince others to take action on behalf of their own personal interests. Knowledge is the foundation of human progress as well as the basis for the expectation that social scientists can help people achieve a brighter future. If social scientists set aside their personal predilections in the service of learning a bit more about human behavior, they can honestly represent their research projects as potentially contributing to the advancement of knowledge.

Milgram argued that obedience could fruitfully be studied in the laboratory and that his findings help to explain the lack of opposition to the Nazis in Germany and so could help to prevent such horrific events. Do you believe that our ethical judgments should differ depending on whether we decide that a study provides valid information about important social psychological processes? Should it matter that a 2005 replication of Milgram’s experiment (with less severe “shocks”) for ABC News supported Milgram’s conclusions (Perry 2013:275–279)?

Honesty and Openness

The scientific concern with validity requires, in turn, that scientists be open in disclosing their methods and honest in presenting their findings. In contrast, research distorted by political or personal pressures to find particular outcomes or to achieve the most marketable results is unlikely to be carried out in an honest and open fashion. The act of publication itself is a vital element in maintaining openness and honesty. Others can review and question study procedures and so generate an open dialogue with the researcher.

A recent publication about Milgram’s experiment challenges his commitment to the standard of openness and honesty. Gina Perry’s (2013) Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments reveals many misleading statements about participants’ postexperiment debriefing, about adherence to the treatment protocol, about the extent of participants’ apparent distress, and about the extent of support for his favored outcome.

Conflicting interests can create a pressure to avoid being open and honest. Conflicts of interest may occur when a researcher has a significant financial stake in the design or outcome of the research. Receiving speaking fees, consulting fees, patents or royalties, and other financial benefits as a result of the way in which a research project is designed or the results that it obtains creates a pressure to distort decisions and findings in one’s (financial) favor. Both federal research funding agencies and journal editors require disclosure of possible conflicts of interest so that others can scrutinize the extent to which these conflicts may have lessened researchers’ honesty and openness (Fisher & Anushko 2008:96–97).

Professional self-interest also generates conflicts of interest. The pressure to publish research findings in important journals and to receive public and professional recognition for creating important new knowledge motivates many researchers and it can tempt some
to alter data or misrepresent procedures or results so that their findings “look better.” This seems to have been behind the problems that led to the retraction of a social science article published in the prestigious journal *Science* in December 2014.

Michael LaCour, a graduate student at UCLA, had conducted a survey funded by the Los Angeles LGBT Center to test the value of using gay canvassers to increase support for legislation that would overturn a same-sex marriage ban. LaCour recruited a senior political scientist at Columbia University to coauthor the *Science* article, in which the claim was made that 10-minute conversations with a gay canvasser could change opponents’ minds. But after wide publicity, two University of California, Berkeley, graduate students tried to extend the study and found that there were problems in the data and that the polling firm that LaCour claimed to have used had no record of such a survey. After the apparent fraud was exposed, Dave Fleischer, director of the center that had sponsored the study, remarked that “it really hurts when you trust somebody to be doing an honest assessment of your work and then it turns out that they did not” (Carey & Belluck 2015:16).

**Protecting Research Participants**

Several standards concerning the treatment of human subjects are emphasized in federal regulations and the ethical guidelines adopted by many professional social science organizations:

- Research should cause no harm to subjects.
- Participation in research should be voluntary, and therefore subjects must give their informed consent to participate in the research and researchers must disclose their identity.
- Researchers should avoid deception, except in limited circumstances.
- Anonymity or confidentiality must be maintained for individual research participants unless it is voluntarily and explicitly waived.
- Researchers should consider the uses of a research project so that its benefits outweigh any foreseeable risks.

**Avoid Harming Research Participants**

Although this standard may seem straightforward, it can be difficult to interpret in specific cases and harder yet to define in a way agreeable to all social scientists. Does it mean that subjects should not be harmed psychologically as well as physically at all? That they should feel no anxiety or distress whatsoever during the study or only after their involvement ends? Should the possibility of any harm, no matter how remote, deter research?

What about possible harm to the subjects of the famous prison simulation study at Stanford University (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo 1973)? The study was designed to investigate the impact of social position on behavior—specifically, the impact of being either a guard or a prisoner in a prison, a “total institution.” The researchers selected apparently stable and mature young male volunteers and asked them to sign a contract to work for 2 weeks as a guard or a prisoner in a simulated prison. Within the first 2 days after the prisoners were incarcerated by the “guards” in a makeshift basement prison, the prisoners began to be passive and disorganized, while the guards became “sadistic”—verbally and physically aggressive (Exhibit 3.3). Five “prisoners” were soon released for depression, uncontrollable crying, fits of rage, and, in one case, a psychosomatic rash. Instead of letting things continue for 2 weeks as planned, Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues terminated the experiment after 6 days to avoid harming the subjects.

Through discussions in special postexperiment encounter sessions, feelings of stress among the participants who played the role of prisoner seemed to be relieved; follow-up during the next year indicated no lasting negative effects on the participants and some benefits in the form of greater insight.

Would you ban such experiments because of the potential for harm to subjects? Are you concerned, like Arthur Miller (1986), that real harm “could result from *not* doing research on destructive obedience” (p. 138) and other troubling human behaviors? How do you think you would have reacted if you were one of the students depicted in Photo 3.2, from the Stanford Prison Experiment?

Potential harm to research participants should also be considered in relation to survey research and observational research. Questions about sensitive personal issues can elicit emotional reactions, including distress. Survey researchers should be prepared to pause or even discontinue questioning and provide a referral to a counselor if a survey includes questions that might elicit such responses.
The requirement of informed consent is more difficult to define than it first appears. To be informed, consent must be given by persons who are competent to consent, who have consented voluntarily, who are fully informed about the research and know who is conducting the research, and who have comprehended what they have been told (Reynolds 1979). You probably recognize that because of the inability to communicate perfectly, “full disclosure of everything that could possibly affect a given subject’s decision to participate is not possible, and therefore cannot be ethically required” (Baumrind 1965:165).

The language of the consent form must be clear and understandable to the research participants and yet sufficiently long and detailed to explain what will actually happen in the research. The consent form in Exhibit 3.4 illustrates a typical approach to these trade-offs.

Experimental researchers whose research design requires some type of subject deception typically withhold some information before the experiment begins, but then debrief subjects at the end in order to maintain something like the full disclosure standard. In a debriefing, the researcher explains to the subjects what happened in the experiment and why, and then responds to their questions. A carefully designed debriefing procedure can help the research participants learn from the experimental research and grapple constructively with feelings elicited by the realization that they were deceived (Sieber 1992:39–41).

Obtaining informed consent also becomes more challenging in collectivist communities in which leaders or the whole group is accustomed to making decisions for individual members. In such settings, usually in non-Western cultures, researchers may have to develop a relationship with the community before individuals can be engaged in research (Bledsoe & Hopson 2009:397–398).

Subject payments create another complication for achieving the goal of informed consent. Although payments to research participants can be a reasonable way to compensate them for their time and effort, payments also serve as an inducement to participate. If the payment is a significant amount in relation to the participants’ normal income, it could lead people to participate in a project even though they may harbor reservations about doing so (Fisher & Anushko 2008:104–105).

Avoid Deception in Research, Except in Limited Circumstances

Deception occurs when subjects are misled about research procedures to determine how they would react to the treatment if they were not research subjects. Deception is a critical component of many social psychology experiments, partly because of the difficulty of simulating real-world stresses and dilemmas in a laboratory setting. The goal is to get subjects “to accept as true what is false or to give a false impression” (Korn 1997:4). In Milgram’s (1964) experiment, for example,
deception seemed necessary because the subjects could not be permitted to administer real electric shocks to the “stooge,” yet it would not have made sense to order the subjects to do something that they didn’t find to be so troubling. Milgram (1992:187–188) insisted that the deception was absolutely essential, although the experimental records indicate that some participants figured out the deception (Perry 2013:128–129).

The results of many other social psychological experiments would be worthless if subjects understood what was really happening to them while the experiment was in progress. For instance, Jane Allyn Piliavin and Irving Piliavin (1972:355–356) staged fake seizures on subway trains to study helpfulness (Korn 1997:3–4). If you were a member of your university’s ethics board, would you vote to allow such deceptive practices in research? What about less dramatic instances of deception in laboratory experiments with students like yourself?

Can you see why an ethics board, representing a range of perspectives, is an important tool for making reasonable, ethical research decisions when confronted with such ambiguity? Exhibit 3.5 shows a portion of the complex flowchart developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to help researchers decide what type of review will be needed for their research plans. Any research involving deception requires formal human subjects review.

**Maintain Privacy and Confidentiality**

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality is another key ethical standard for protecting research participants, and the researcher’s commitment to that standard should be included in the informed consent agreement (Sieber 1992). Procedures to protect each subject’s privacy—such as locking records and creating special identifying codes—must be created to minimize the risk of access by unauthorized persons. However, statements about confidentiality should be realistic: Laws allow research records to be subpoenaed and may require reporting of child abuse; a researcher may feel compelled to release information if a health- or life-threatening situation arises and participants need to be alerted. Also, the standard of confidentiality does not apply to observation in public places and information available in public records. To avoid potential problems, social researchers who do not need to contact research participants more than

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**EXHIBIT 3.4 Consent Form**

University of Massachusetts Boston
Department of Sociology
100 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125-3393

Consent Form for Teen Empowerment Study: Current Organizers

**Introduction and Contact Information**

I am conducting a study of the Teen Empowerment Program. In order for you to participate, I need to ask for your consent.

The principal researcher is Professor Russell Schutt, Department of Sociology at UMass Boston. I am Whitney Gecker, his research assistant in this project. Please read this form and feel free to ask questions. If you have further questions later, Professor Schutt will discuss them with you. His telephone number is 617-287-6253.

**Description of the Project**

Teen Empowerment (TE) is an innovative program for youth in Somerville, Massachusetts and several other locations. This research project is a comprehensive evaluation of the Teen Empowerment program in Somerville, MA. It is to learn whether and if so how the TE model is successful.

The study will describe the backgrounds, attitudes, experiences and activities of current and past program participants and of youth who applied to the program but did not participate in it. The study will identify the impact of the TE process on individual participants, including their behavior, their feelings about themselves, and their awareness and demonstration of love and forgiveness toward others. It will also examine the effect of TE on participants’ relationships with others; on the rate of crime in the community, and on the participants’ lives in comparison to the lives of program applicants who were not accepted.

The research procedures involve interviews with current and former youth participants and unsuccessful applicants, as well as observation of group activities. Participation in this study will take approximately one hour. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked a series of questions about your attitudes, your experiences in school and work, your relationships with family and friends, your health behaviors and experiences of violence. You will also be asked about the Teen Empowerment program and the Somerville community. You will receive a $15 gift certificate for your participation. If you agree, we will also record information that you provided to Teen Empowerment on forms you collected when you applied to the program.

**Risks or Discomforts**

The primary risk associated with this study is that the investigators may learn information about you that you did not wish to share with them. If you have any concern that you have disclosed information that you do not wish to have known, or if you have any other concerns or feelings as a result of the interview, you may speak with Professor Schutt to discuss this at any point, by calling 617-287-6253, or by communicating by email (Russell.schutt@umb.edu) or regular mail, addressed to Professor Schutt at the University of Massachusetts, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125-3393. If you indicate any feelings of distress during the study, the project interviewer will suggest that you speak to a Teen Empowerment staff member and will provide referral information for service agencies in Somerville.

(Continued)
Section I  Foundations for Social Research

Confidentiality
Your part in this research is confidential. The final project report will not name the specific individuals who were interviewed nor link comments made in interviews to these individuals. Please note that Massachusetts law requires that information about abuse or neglect must be reported to the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. If you state that you are abused or neglected, I will inform Professor Schutt, the Principal Investigator, and he will report this information to the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families.

Voluntary Participation
The decision whether or not to take part in this research study is voluntary. If you do decide to take part in this study, you may decline to answer any question and you may terminate participation at any time without consequence. Whatever you decide about participation will not be known to any other current or former Teen Empowerment participants or staff or to anyone else.

Rights
You have the right to ask questions about this research at any time during the study. You can reach Russell Schutt to ask further questions at 617-287-6253. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact a representative of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, which oversees research involving human participants. The Institutional Review Board may be reached at the following address: IRB, Quinn Administration Building-2-015, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125-3393. You can also contact the Board by telephone or e-mail at (617) 287-5370 or at human.subjects@umb.edu.

I HAVE READ THE CONSENT FORM. MY QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. MY SIGNATURE ON THIS FORM INDICATES THAT I CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I ALSO CERTIFY THAT I AM 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER.

Signature of Participant  Date

Typed/Printed Name of Participant

MY SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT I CONSENT TO HAVE INFORMATION USED IN THE STUDY THAT I PROVIDED WHEN I APPLIED TO TEEN EMPowerment.

Signature of Participant  Date

Signature of Researcher  Date

Typed/Printed Name of Researcher

How might payment for participating in a research study complicate ethical considerations related to social research?

once may ensure that their data are anonymous, so that there are no potential identifiers linking participants to the data about them. Any unique identifier, such as a birthdate or, in some circumstances, place of birth must be omitted in order to ensure anonymity.

There is one exception to some of these constraints: The National Institutes of Health (NIH) can issue a Certificate of Confidentiality to protect researchers from being legally required to disclose confidential information. This is intended to help researchers overcome the reluctance of individuals engaged in illegal behavior to sign a consent form or to risk exposure of their illegal activities (Sharma 2009:426). Researchers who are focusing on high-risk populations or behaviors, such as crime, substance abuse, sexual activity, or genetic information, can request such a certificate. Suspicions of child abuse or neglect must still be reported, and in some states, researchers may still be required to report such crimes as elder abuse (Arwood & Panicker 2007).
The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) passed by Congress in 1996 created more stringent regulations for the protection of health care data. As implemented by the DHHS in 2000 (revised in 2002), the HIPAA Final Privacy Rule applies to oral, written, and electronic information that "relates to the past, present or future physical or mental health or condition of an individual." The HIPAA rule requires that researchers have valid authorization for any use or disclosure of "protected health information" from a health care provider. Waivers of authorization can be granted in special circumstances (Cava, Cushman, & Goodman 2007).

Consider Uses of Research So That Benefits Outweigh Risks
Social scientists must also consider the uses to which their research is put. Although many scientists believe that personal values should be left outside the laboratory, some feel that it is proper—even necessary—for scientists to concern themselves with the way their research is used.

**Certificate of Confidentiality**: A certificate issued to a researcher by the National Institutes of Health that ensures the right to protect information obtained about high-risk populations or behaviors—except child abuse or neglect—from legal subpoenas.

**Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)**: A congressional act passed in 1996 that creates stringent regulations for the protection of health care data.

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**EXHIBIT 3.5  U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Human Subjects Decision Flowchart 4: For Tests, Surveys, Interviews, Public Behavior Observation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>START: Does the research involve only the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior?</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the research involve children to whom 45 CFR part 46 subpart D applies?</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the information obtained recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and could any disclosure of the &quot;human subjects’ responses outside the research reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation?</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research is not exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, the 45 CFR 46.101(b)(3) exemption might apply.</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the human subjects elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office? (Applies to senior officials, such as mayor or school superintendent, rather than a police officer or teacher.)</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research is not exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the research involve survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior where the investigator participates in the activities being observed? [as CFR 46.101(b)]</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research is exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(3) from all 45 CFR part 46 requirements.</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The evaluation research by Lawrence Sherman and Richard Berk (1984) on police response to domestic violence provides an interesting cautionary tale about the uses of science. As you recall from Chapter 2, the results of this field experiment indicated that those who were arrested were less likely to subsequently commit violent acts against their partners. Sherman (1993) explicitly cautioned police departments not to adopt mandatory arrest policies based solely on the results of the Minneapolis experiment, but the results were publicized in the mass media and encouraged many jurisdictions to change their policies (Binder & Meeker 1993; Lempert 1989). We now know that the original finding of a deterrent effect of arrest did not hold up in many other cities where the experiment was repeated, so it is not clear that the initial changes in arrest policy were beneficial.

The potential of withholding a beneficial treatment from some subjects also is a cause for ethical concern. The Sherman and Berk (1984) experiment required the random assignment of subjects to treatment conditions and thus had the potential of causing harm to the victims of domestic violence whose batterers were not arrested. The justification for the study design, however, is quite persuasive: The researchers didn’t know before the experiment which response to a domestic violence complaint would be most likely to deter future incidents (Sherman 1992). The experiment provided what seemed at first to be clear evidence about the value of arrest, so it can be argued that the benefits outweighed the risks. Do you agree?

The Institutional Review Board

Federal regulations require that every institution that seeks federal funding for biomedical or behavioral research on human subjects have an institutional review board (IRB) that reviews research proposals involving human subjects—including data about living individuals. According to federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102(d)], research is “a systematic investigation . . . designed to develop or test hypotheses.”

In the News

IS SAME-SEX MARRIAGE BAD FOR CHILDREN?

“In a federal court in Detroit starting Tuesday, in the first trial of its kind in years, the social science research on family structure and child progress will be openly debated, with expert testimony and cross-examination, offering an unusual public dissection of the methods of sociology and the intersection of science and politics.”

This announcement in the New York Times focused primarily on the role of a sociologist at the University of Texas, Austin, Mark Regnerus, who published in 2012 findings from a survey that had been funded by $785,000 from private centers that opposed gay marriage. The survey results seemed to indicate that children who had a parent who had ever had a same-sex liaison had worse behavioral and psychological outcomes.

Asserting multiple flaws in the study, Wendy D. Manning, a professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio who coauthored a critique of the Regnerus research by the American Sociological Association, said that instead the study simply confirmed other research showing that family stability predicts child well-being: “Every study has shortcomings, but when you pull them all together, the picture is very clear. There is no evidence that children fare worse in same-sex families.”

1. Do you believe researchers should be required to reveal the sources of their funding?
2. What are the risks and benefits of conducting research or using research findings to influence public policy?
3. Should IRBs consider whether researchers’ personal preferences or their funding sources may bias their research decisions to favor a particular result?
IRBs at universities and other agencies apply ethical standards that are set by federal regulations but can be expanded or specified by the institution’s IRB and involve all research at the institution irrespective of the funding source (Sieber 1992:5, 10). The IRB has the authority to require changes in a research protocol or to refuse to approve a research protocol if it deems human subjects protections inadequate.

To promote adequate review of ethical issues, the regulations require that IRBs include at least five members, with at least one nonscientist and one from outside the institution (Speiglman & Spear 2009:124). The IRB must also include members from both sexes, diverse backgrounds, and multiple professions. When research is reviewed concerning vulnerable populations, such as prisoners, the IRB must include a member having experience with and knowledge about that vulnerable population. Sensitivity to community attitudes and training in human subjects protection procedures is also required (Selwitz, Epley, & Erickson 2013).

Every member of an institution with an IRB—including faculty, students, and staff at a college or university—must submit a proposal to their IRB before conducting research with identifiable people that is not solely conducted for educational benefit. The IRB proposal must include research instruments and consent forms, as applicable, as well as enough detail about the research design to convince the IRB members that the potential benefits of the research outweigh any risks (Speiglman & Spear 2009:124). Most IRBs also require that researchers complete a training program about human subjects, usually the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) at the University of Miami (https://www.citiprogram.org). CITI training is divided into topical modules ranging from history, ethical principles, and informed consent to vulnerable populations, Internet-based research, educational research, and records-based research. Each IRB determines which CITI training modules researchers at its institution must complete.

Although the IRB is the responsible authority within the institution, many research proposals do not have to be reviewed by the full board (Hicks 2013). Some proposals, including many developed by social scientists, may be exempt from review because they involve very low perceived risk, such as a survey that does not collect information that could be harmful to respondents if it were disclosed or analysis of existing records that are not individually identifiable.

**Office for Protection From Research Risks, National Institutes of Health:**

The office in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) that provides leadership and supervision about the protection of the rights, welfare, and well-being of subjects involved in research conducted or supported by DHHS, including monitoring IRBs.

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**MANAN NAYAK, SENIOR PROJECT DIRECTOR**

After Manan Nayak graduated from the accelerated B.A./M.A. program in applied sociology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, she began her career as a quality assurance analyst for a university-affiliated medical center. Initially, she used her quantitative skills to manage data from multiple clinical trials. In this role, she submitted regular reports to various committees, including the data safety and monitoring committee that ensures each study is scientifically and ethically appropriate based on federal regulations. However, it was not until she became a clinical researcher that she appreciated the importance of human subjects boards. As she approached eligible patients for studies, she learned that many patients wanted to participate in the hopes that the data collected could help someone else—despite already dealing with the effects of treatment and multiple demands on their time.

The patients’ selflessness motivated Nayak to develop her research career and learn more about ethical and regulatory issues and how to ensure that research teams adhere to strict guidelines. She worked alongside investigators to write applications that clearly state the process the research team will follow, including how participants are identified, what they will be asked to consent to and for how long, as well as how their data will be collected, stored, and distributed. The procedures outlined and approved by the regulatory boards are followed strictly, and any major or minor deviations are reported to the institutional review board immediately, along with a resolution indicating how infractions can be avoided in the future. Bringing to fruition a research study and making a small contribution in understanding how a treatment affects a group of patients and the challenges they face during treatment are the rewards of doing such research. Nayak’s advice is to realize, in the excitement of doing social research, the many opportunities available to apply skills you learn in research courses.
Many research proposals that do not meet the criteria for exemption but still pose only minimal risk to human subjects may be given an expedited review by IRB representatives (often an IRB administrator and the IRB chair), rather than being sent to a hearing at a meeting of the full IRB. However, the decision of whether a research project is exempt or can have an expedited review must be made by a representative of the IRB (Speiglman & Spear 2009:125–126).

The IRB may also serve as the privacy board that ensures researchers’ compliance with HIPAA. In this capacity, the IRB responds to requests for waivers or alterations of the authorization requirement under the privacy rule for uses and disclosures of protected health information in research. Researchers seeking to collect or use existing HIPAA data must provide additional information to the IRB about their plans for using the health information.

**Conclusions**

The extent to which ethical issues are a problem for researchers and participants in their research varies with the type of research design, but it is always a concern. Survey research creates few risks to research participants, but it does not eliminate the hazards of unethical research procedures or reporting. In fact, researchers from Michigan’s Institute for Survey Research interviewed a representative national sample of adults some years ago and found that 68% of those who had participated in a survey were somewhat or very interested in participating in another; the more times respondents had been interviewed, the more willing they were to participate again. Presumably, they would have felt differently if they had been treated unethically (Reynolds 1979:56–57). Conversely, some experimental studies in the social sciences that have put people in uncomfortable or embarrassing situations have generated vociferous complaints and years of debate about ethics, although they may have made major contributions to understanding the social world (Reynolds 1979; Sjoberg 1967).

The evaluation of ethical issues in a research project should be based on a realistic assessment of the overall potential for harm and benefit to research subjects and the researchers’ adherence to methodological standards rather than on an apparent inconsistency between any particular aspect of a research plan and a specific ethical guideline. For example, full disclosure of “what is really going on” in an experimental study may be less of a concern if subjects are unlikely to be harmed. Nevertheless, researchers should make every effort to foresee all possible risks and to weigh the possible benefits of the research against these risks. Researchers should consult with individuals with different perspectives to develop a realistic risk-benefit assessment and should try to maximize the benefits to, as well as minimize the risks for, research participants (Sieber 1992:75–108).
except in limited circumstances, maintaining privacy and confidentiality, and ensuring that the benefits of research outweigh foreseeable risks.

- The American Sociological Association’s general principles for professional practice urge sociologists to be committed in their work to high levels of competence, to practicing with integrity, and to maintaining responsibility for their actions. They must also respect the rights, dignity, and diversity of others, including research participants, as well as be socially responsible to their communities and use research to contribute to the public good.

- Scientific research should maintain high standards for validity and be conducted and reported in an honest and open fashion.

- Effective debriefing of subjects after an experiment can help reduce the risk of harm resulting from the use of deception in the experiment.

Chapter Questions

1. Milgram’s research on obedience to authority has been used to explain the behavior of soldiers charged with intentionally harming civilians during armed conflicts, both on the battlefield and when guarding prisoners of war. Do you think social scientists can use experiments such as Milgram’s to learn about ethical behavior in the social world in general? What about in situations of armed conflict? Consider in your answers Perry’s discoveries about aspects of Milgram’s research that he did not disclose.

2. Should social scientists be permitted to conduct replications of Milgram’s obedience experiments? What about Zimbardo’s prison simulation? Can you justify such research as permissible within the current ASA ethical standards? If not, do you believe that these standards should be altered to permit Milgram-type research?

Practice Exercises

1. The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) offers an extensive online training course in the basics of human subjects protections issues. Go to the public access CITI site at https://www.citiprogram.org/ and complete the course in social and behavioral research. Write a short summary of what you have learned.

2. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains extensive resources concerning the protection of human subjects in research. Read several documents that you find on its website, www.hhs.gov/ohrp, and write a short report about them.