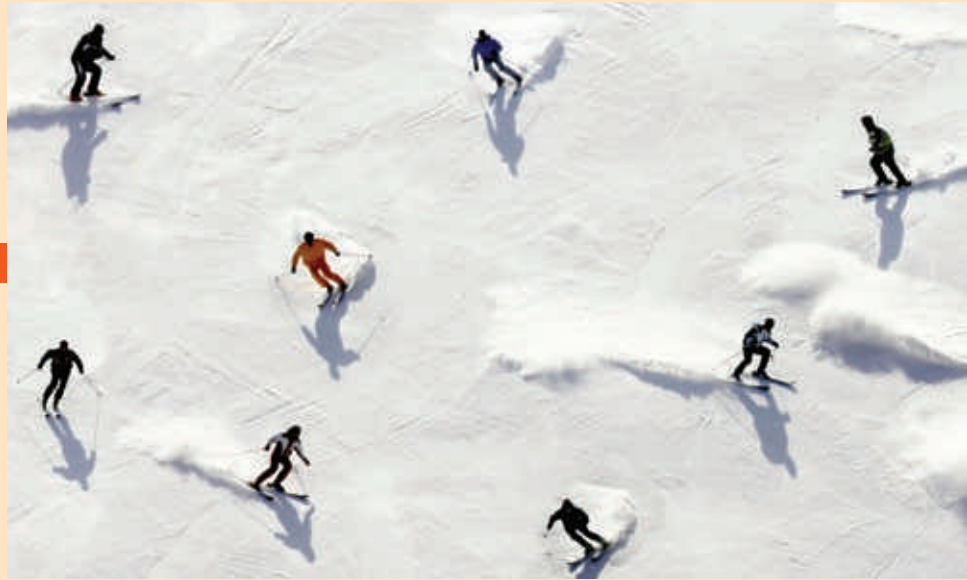


# The Ethics and Politics of Social Research

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Social research takes place in a social context. Researchers must therefore take into account many ethical and political considerations alongside scientific ones in designing and executing their research. Often, however, clear-cut answers to thorny ethical and political issues are hard to come by.



### Introduction

#### Ethical Issues in Social Research

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## Introduction

My purpose in this book is to present a realistic and useful introduction to doing social research. For this introduction to be fully realistic, it must include four main constraints on research projects: scientific, administrative, ethical, and political.

Most of the book focuses on scientific and administrative constraints. We'll see that the logic of science suggests certain research procedures, but we'll also see that some scientifically "perfect" study designs are not administratively feasible because they would be too expensive or take too long to execute. Throughout the book, therefore, we'll deal with workable compromises.

Before we get to the scientific and administrative constraints on research, it's useful to explore the two other important considerations in doing research in the real world—ethics and politics—which this chapter covers. Just as certain procedures are too impractical to use, others are either ethically prohibitive or politically difficult or impossible. Here's a story to illustrate what I mean.

Several years ago, I was invited to sit in on a planning session to design a study of legal education in California. The joint project was to be conducted by a university research center and the state bar association. The purpose of the project was to improve legal education by learning which aspects of the law school experience were related to success on the bar exam. Essentially, the plan was to prepare a questionnaire that would get detailed information about the law school experiences of individuals. People would be required to answer the questionnaire when they took the bar exam. By analyzing how people with different kinds of law school experiences did on the bar exam, we could find out what sorts of things worked and what didn't. The findings of the research could be made available to law schools, and ultimately legal education could be improved.

The exciting thing about collaborating with the bar association was that all the normally irritating logistical hassles would be handled. There would be no problem getting permission

to administer questionnaires in conjunction with the exam, for example, and the problem of non-response could be eliminated altogether.

I left the meeting excited about the prospects for the study. When I told a colleague about it, I glowed about the absolute handling of the nonresponse problem. Her immediate comment turned everything around completely. "That's unethical. There's no law requiring the questionnaire, and participation in research has to be voluntary." The study wasn't done.

In retelling this story, I can easily see that requiring participation would have been inappropriate. You may have seen this even before I told you about my colleague's comment. I still feel a little embarrassed over the matter, but I have a specific purpose in telling this story about myself.

All of us consider ourselves ethical—not perfect perhaps, but as ethical as anyone else and perhaps more so than most. The problem in social research, as probably in life, is that ethical considerations are not always apparent to us. As a result, we often plunge into things without seeing ethical issues that may be apparent to others and may even be obvious to us when pointed out. When I reported back to the others in the planning group, for example, no one disagreed with the inappropriateness of requiring participation. Everyone was a bit embarrassed about not having seen it.

Any of us can immediately see that a study requiring small children to be tortured is unethical. I know you'd speak out immediately if I suggested that we interview people about their sex lives and then publish what they said in the local newspaper. But, as ethical as you are, you'll totally miss the ethical issues in some other situations—we all do.

The first half of this chapter deals with the ethics of social research. In part, it presents some of the broadly agreed-on norms describing what's ethical in research and what's not. More important than simply knowing the guidelines, however, is becoming sensitized to the ethical component in research so that you'll look for it whenever you plan a study. Even when the ethical aspects of a situation are debatable, you should know that there's something to argue

about. It's worth noting in this context that many professions operate under ethical constraints and that these constraints differ from one profession to another. Thus, priests, physicians, lawyers, reporters, and television producers operate under different ethical constraints. In this chapter, we'll look only at the ethical principles that govern social research.

Political considerations in research are also subtle, ambiguous, and arguable. Notice that the law school example involves politics as well as ethics. Although social researchers have an ethical norm that participation in research should be voluntary, this norm clearly grows out of U.S. political norms protecting civil liberties. In some nations, the proposed study would have been considered quite ethical.

In the second half of this chapter, we'll look at social research projects that were crushed or nearly crushed by political considerations. As with ethical concerns, there is often no "correct" take on a given situation. People of goodwill disagree. I won't try to give you a party line about what is and is not politically acceptable. As with ethics, the point is to become sensitive to the political dimension of social research.

## Ethical Issues in Social Research

In most dictionaries and in common usage, ethics is typically associated with morality, and both words concern matters of right and wrong. But what is right and what is wrong? What is the source of the distinction? For individuals, the sources vary and may be religions, political ideologies, or the pragmatic observation of what seems to work and what doesn't.

*Webster's New World Dictionary* is typical among dictionaries in defining *ethical* as "conforming to the standards of conduct of a given profession or group." Although this definition may frustrate those in search of moral absolutes, what we regard as morality and ethics in day-to-day life is a matter of agreement among members of a group. And, not surprisingly, different groups have agreed on different codes of conduct. Part of living successfully in a particular society is knowing what that society considers ethical and unethical. The same holds true for the social research community.

Anyone involved in social science research, then, needs to be aware of the general agreements shared by researchers about what is proper and improper in the conduct of scientific inquiry. This section summarizes some of the most important ethical agreements that prevail in social research.

## Voluntary Participation

Often, though not always, social research represents an intrusion into people's lives. The interviewer's knock on the door or the arrival of a questionnaire in the mail signals the beginning of an activity that the respondent has not requested and that may require significant time and energy. Participation in a social experiment disrupts the subject's regular activities.

Social research, moreover, often requires that people reveal personal information about themselves—information that may be unknown to their friends and associates. And social research often requires that such information be revealed to strangers. Other professionals, such as physicians and lawyers, also ask for such information. Their requests may be justified, however, by their aims: They need the information in order to serve the personal interests of the respondent. Social researchers can seldom make this claim. Like medical scientists, they can only argue that the research effort may ultimately help all humanity.

A major tenet of medical research ethics is that experimental participation must be voluntary. The same norm applies to social research. No one should be forced to participate. This norm is far easier to accept in theory than to apply in practice, however.

Again, medical research provides a useful parallel. Many experimental drugs used to be tested on prisoners. In the most rigorously ethical cases, the prisoners were told the nature and the possible dangers of the experiment, they were told that participation was completely voluntary, and they were further instructed that they could expect no special rewards—such as early parole—for participation. Even under these conditions, it was often clear that volunteers were motivated by the belief that they would personally benefit from their cooperation.

When the instructor in an introductory sociology class asks students to fill out a questionnaire that he or she hopes to analyze and publish, students should always be told that participation in the survey is completely voluntary. Even so, most students will fear that nonparticipation will somehow affect their grade. The instructor should therefore be sensitive to such implications and make special provisions to eliminate them. For example, the instructor could ensure anonymity by leaving the room while the questionnaires are being completed. Or, students could be asked to return the questionnaires by mail or to drop them in a box near the door before the next course meeting.

This norm of voluntary participation, though, goes directly against several scientific concerns. In the most general terms, the scientific goal of generalizability is threatened if experimental subjects or survey respondents are all the kind of people who willingly participate in such things. Because this orientation probably reflects more-general personality traits, the results of the research might not be generalizable to all people. Most clearly, in the case of a descriptive survey, a researcher cannot generalize the sample survey findings to an entire population unless a substantial majority of the scientifically selected sample actually participates—the willing respondents and the somewhat unwilling.

As you'll see in Chapter 10, field research has its own ethical dilemmas in this regard. Very often the researcher cannot even reveal that a study is being done, for fear that that revelation might significantly affect the social processes being studied. Clearly, the subjects of study in such cases are not given the opportunity to volunteer or refuse to participate.

Though the norm of voluntary participation is important, it is often impossible to follow. In cases where researchers feel ultimately justified in violating it, their observing the other ethical norms of scientific research, such as bringing no harm to the people under study, becomes all the more important.

## No Harm to the Participants

The need for norms against harming research subjects has stemmed in part from horrendous actions by medical researchers. Perhaps at the

top of the list stand the medical experiments on prisoners of war by Nazi researchers in World War II. The subsequent war-crimes trials at Nuremberg added the phrase *crimes against humanity* to the language of research and political ethics

Less well-known were the Tuskegee syphilis experiments conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service between 1932 and 1972. The study followed the fate of nearly 400 impoverished, rural African American men suffering from syphilis. After penicillin had been accepted as an effective treatment for syphilis, the subjects were denied treatment—even kept from seeking treatment in the community—because the researchers wanted to observe the full progression of the disease. At times, diagnostic procedures such as spinal taps were falsely presented to subjects as cures for syphilis.

When the details of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments became widely known, the U.S. government took action, including a formal apology by President Bill Clinton and a program of financial reparations to the families of the subjects.

Perhaps the most concrete response to the Tuskegee scandal was the 1974 National Research Act that created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The commission was charged with the task of determining the fundamental ethical principles that should guide research on human subjects. The commission subsequently published *The Belmont Report*, which elaborated on three key principles:

1. **Respect for Persons**—Participation must be completely voluntary and based on full understanding of what is involved. Moreover, special caution must be taken to protect minors and those lacking complete autonomy (e.g., prisoners).
2. **Beneficence**—Subjects must not be harmed by the research and, ideally, should benefit from it.
3. **Justice**—The burdens and benefits of research should be shared fairly within the society.

You can find *The Belmont Report* at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html>.

The National Research Act also established a requirement for Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) through which universities would monitor compliance with ethical standards in research involving human subjects. We'll return to the role of IRBs later in this chapter.

Because subjects can be harmed psychologically in the course of a social research study, the researcher must look for the subtlest dangers and guard against them. Quite often, research subjects are asked to reveal deviant behavior, attitudes they feel are unpopular or personal characteristics that may seem demeaning, such as little education, long-term unemployment, and the like. Revealing such information usually makes subjects feel, at the very least, uncomfortable.

Social research projects may also force participants to face aspects of themselves that they don't normally consider. This can happen even when the information is not revealed directly to the researcher. In retrospect, a certain past behavior may appear unjust or immoral. The project, then, can cause continuing personal agony for the subject. If the study concerns codes of ethical conduct, for example, the subject may begin questioning his or her own morality, and that personal concern may last long after the research has been completed and reported. For instance, probing questions can injure a fragile self-esteem.

In 1971 the psychologist Philip Zimbardo created his now-famous simulation of prison life, widely known as the "Stanford prison experiment," to study the dynamics of prisoner-guard interactions. Zimbardo employed Stanford students as subjects and randomly assigned them to roles as prisoners or guards. As you may be aware, the simulation became quickly and increasingly real for all the participants, including Zimbardo, who served as prison superintendent. It became evident that many of the student-prisoners were suffering psychological damage as a consequence of their mock incarceration, and some of the student-guards were soon exhibiting

degrees of sadism that would later challenge their own self-images.

As these developments became apparent to Zimbardo, he terminated the experiment. He then created a debriefing program in which all the participants were counseled so as to avoid any lasting damage from the experience.

As you can see, just about any research you might conduct runs the risk of injuring other people in some way. It isn't possible to ensure against all possible injuries, but some study designs make such injuries more likely than others do. If a particular research procedure has the potential to produce unpleasant effects for subjects—asking survey respondents to report deviant behavior, for example—the researcher should have the firmest of scientific grounds for doing it. If your research design is essential and also likely to be unpleasant for subjects, you'll find yourself in an ethical netherworld and may go through some personal agonizing. Although agonizing has little value in itself, it may be a healthy sign that you've become sensitive to the problem.

Increasingly, the ethical norms of voluntary participation and no harm to participants have become formalized in the concept of **informed consent**. This norm means that subjects must base their voluntary participation in research projects on a full understanding of the possible risks involved. In a medical experiment, for example, prospective subjects are presented with a discussion of the experiment and all the possible risks to themselves. They are required to sign a statement indicating that they are aware of the risks and that they choose to participate anyway. Although the value of such a procedure is obvious when subjects will be injected with drugs designed to produce physical effects, for example, it's hardly appropriate when a participant observer rushes to a scene of urban rioting to study deviant behavior. Whereas the researcher in this latter case must still bring no harm to those observed, gaining informed consent is not the means to achieving that end.

Although the fact often goes unrecognized, another possible source of harm to subjects lies in the analysis and reporting of data. Every now and then, research subjects read the books published about the studies they participated in. Reasonably sophisticated subjects can locate

**informed consent** A norm in which subjects base their voluntary participation in research projects on a full understanding of the possible risks involved.

themselves in the various indexes and tables. Having done so, they may find themselves characterized—though not identified by name—as bigoted, unpatriotic, irreligious, and so forth. At the very least, such characterizations are likely to trouble them and threaten their self-images. Yet the whole purpose of the research project may be to explain why some people are prejudiced and others are not.

In one survey of churchwomen (Babbie 1967), ministers in a sample of churches were asked to distribute questionnaires to a specified sample of members, collect them, and return them to the research office. One of these ministers read through the questionnaires from his sample before returning them, and then he delivered a hellfire and brimstone sermon to his congregation, saying that many of them were atheists and were going to hell. Even though he could not identify the people who gave particular responses, many respondents certainly endured personal harm from his tirade.

Like voluntary participation, avoiding harm to people is easy in theory but often difficult in practice. Sensitivity to the issue and experience with its applications, however, should improve the researcher's tact in delicate areas of research.

In recent years, social researchers have been gaining support for abiding by this norm. Federal and other funding agencies typically require an independent evaluation of the treatment of human subjects for research proposals, and most universities now have human-subject committees to serve this evaluative function. Although sometimes troublesome and inappropriately applied, such requirements not only guard against unethical research but also can reveal ethical issues overlooked by even the most scrupulous researchers. See the Tips and Tools box, “Basic Elements of Informed Consent,” for guidelines from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## Anonymity and Confidentiality

The clearest concern in the protection of the subjects' interests and well-being is the protection of their identity, especially in survey research. If revealing their survey responses would injure them in any way, adherence to this norm becomes all the more important. Two

techniques—**anonymity** and **confidentiality**—assist researchers in this regard, although people often confuse the two.

### Anonymity

A research project guarantees **anonymity** when the researcher—not just the people who read about the research—cannot identify a given response with a given respondent. This implies that a typical interview-survey respondent can never be considered anonymous, because an interviewer collects the information from an identifiable respondent. An example of anonymity is a mail survey in which no identification numbers are put on the questionnaires before their return to the research office.

As we'll see in Chapter 9 (“Survey Research”), assuring anonymity makes keeping track of who has or hasn't returned the questionnaires difficult. Despite this problem, paying the necessary price is advisable in certain situations. For example, in one study of drug use among university students, I decided that I specifically did not want to know the identity of respondents. I felt that honestly assuring anonymity would increase the likelihood and accuracy of responses. Also, I did not want to be in the position of being asked by authorities for the names of drug offenders. In the few instances in which respondents volunteered their names, such information was immediately obliterated from the questionnaires.

### Confidentiality

A research project guarantees **confidentiality** when the researcher can identify a given person's responses but essentially promises not to do so publicly. In an interview survey, for example, the researcher could make public the income reported by a given respondent, but the respondent is assured that this will not be done.

**anonymity** Anonymity is achieved in a research project when neither the researchers nor the readers of the findings can identify a given response with a given respondent.

**confidentiality** A research project guarantees confidentiality when the researcher can identify a given person's responses but promises not to do so publicly.



## Tips and Tools

### The Basic Elements of Informed Consent

The Department of Health and Human Services has published the federal regulations pertaining to what must be included in formal proposals for research projects involving human subjects. These requirements became effective on June 23, 2005. The following is an excerpt from that document.

1. A statement that the study involves research, an explanation of the purposes of the research and the expected duration of the subject's participation, a description of the procedures to be followed, and identification of any procedures which are experimental;
2. A description of any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the subject;
3. A description of any benefits to the subject or to others which may reasonably be expected from the research;
4. A disclosure of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to the subject;
5. A statement describing the extent, if any, to which confidentiality of records identifying the subject will be maintained;

6. For research involving more than minimal risk, an explanation as to whether any compensation and an explanation as to whether any medical treatments are available if injury occurs and, if so, what they consist of, or where further information may be obtained;
7. An explanation of whom to contact for answers to pertinent questions about the research and research subject's rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject; and
8. A statement that participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled, and the subject may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled.

A web search will provide you with many samples of informed consent letters that you could use as models in your own research. It is worth noting that survey research and some other research techniques are exempted from the need to obtain informed consent. You can learn more about this and related topics at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp>.

Source: <http://grants2.nih.gov/grants/policy/hs/>.

Whenever a research project is confidential rather than anonymous, it is the researcher's responsibility to make that fact clear to the respondent. Moreover, researchers should never use the term *anonymous* to mean *confidential*.

With few exceptions (such as surveys of public figures who agree to have their responses published), the information respondents give must at least be kept confidential. This is not always an easy norm to follow, because for example the courts have not recognized social research data as the kind of "privileged communication" priests and attorneys have.

Here's an example of the risk researchers and subjects can face due to the unprotected guarantee of confidentiality. In March 1989, the Exxon Valdez supertanker ran aground near the port of Valdez in Alaska, and spilled 10 million gallons of oil into the bay. The economic and environmental damage was widely reported.

The media paid less attention to the psychological and sociological damage suffered by residents of the area. There were anecdotal reports of increased alcoholism, family violence, and other secondary consequences of the disruptions

caused by the oil spill. Eventually, 22 communities on Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska sued Exxon for the economic, social, and psychological damages suffered by their residents.

To determine the amount of damage done, the communities commissioned a San Diego research firm to undertake a household survey asking residents very personal questions about increased problems in their families. The sample of residents were asked to reveal painful and embarrassing information, under the guarantee of absolute confidentiality. Ultimately, the results of the survey confirmed that a variety of personal and family problems had increased substantially following the oil spill.

When Exxon learned that survey data would be presented to document the suffering, they took an unusual step: They asked the court to subpoena the survey questionnaires. The court granted the request and ordered the researchers to turn over the questionnaires—with all identifying information. It appeared that Exxon's intention was to call survey respondents to the stand and cross-examine them regarding answers they had given to interviewers under the guarantee of confidentiality.

Moreover, many of the respondents were Native Americans, whose cultural norms made such public revelations all the more painful.

Fortunately, the Exxon *Valdez* case was settled before the court decided whether it would force survey respondents to testify in open court. Unfortunately, there was a potential for an ethical disaster on top of the environmental one. For more information on this ecological disaster, see Picou, Gill, and Cohen (1999).

The seriousness of this issue is not limited to established research firms. Rik Scarce was a graduate student at Washington State University when he undertook participant observation among animal-rights activists. In 1990 he published a book based on his research: *Ecowarriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement*. In 1993, Scarce was called before a grand jury and asked to identify the activists he had studied. In keeping with the norm of confidentiality, the young researcher refused to answer the grand jury's questions and spent 159 days in the Spokane County jail. He reports,

Although I answered many of the prosecutor's questions, on 32 occasions I refused to answer, saying, "Your question calls for information that I have only by virtue of a confidential disclosure given to me in the course of my research activities. I cannot answer the question without actually breaching a confidential communication. Consequently, I decline to answer the question under my ethical obligations as a member of the American Sociological Association and pursuant to any privilege that may extend to journalists, researchers, and writers under the First Amendment."

(Scarce 1999: 982)

At the time of his grand jury appearance and his incarceration, Scarce felt that the American Sociological Association (ASA) code of ethics strongly supported his ethical stand, and the ASA filed a friend of the court brief on his behalf. In 1997, the ASA revised its code and, while still upholding the norm of confidentiality, warned researchers to inform themselves regarding laws and rules that may limit their ability to promise confidentiality to research subjects.

You can use several techniques to guard against such dangers and ensure better

performance on the guarantee of confidentiality. To begin, interviewers and others with access to respondent identifications should be trained in their ethical responsibilities. Beyond training, the most fundamental technique is to remove identifying information as soon as it's no longer necessary. In a survey, for example, all names and addresses should be removed from questionnaires and replaced by identification numbers. An identification file should be created that links numbers to names to permit the later correction of missing or contradictory information, but this file should not be available except for legitimate purposes.

Similarly, in an interview survey you may need to identify respondents initially so that you can recontact them to verify that the interview was conducted and perhaps to get information that was missing in the original interview. As soon as you've verified an interview and assured yourself that you don't need any further information from the respondent, however, you can safely remove all identifying information from the interview booklet. Often, interview booklets are printed so that the first page contains all the identifiers—it can be torn off once the respondent's identification is no longer needed.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced a program to issue a "Certificate of Confidentiality" to protect the confidentiality of research subject data against forced disclosure by the police and other authorities. Not all research projects qualify for such protection, but it can provide an important support for research ethics in many cases.

Under section 301(d) of the Public Health Service Act [42 U.S.C. 241(d)] the Secretary of Health and Human Services may authorize persons engaged in biomedical, behavioral, clinical, or other research to protect the privacy of individuals who are the subjects of that research. This authority has been delegated to the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Persons authorized by the NIH to protect the privacy of research subjects may not be compelled in any Federal, State, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings to identify them by name or other identifying characteristic.

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2002)



The increased use of visual techniques in social research has created a new problem for protecting subjects, as discussed by Rose Wiles and her colleagues (2012). The authors lay out some of the terrain for this issue:

concerns include the contexts in which images were produced and through which they may be consumed, the longevity of images in the public domain and the potential for future uses and secondary analysis of images.

(2012: 41)

In all the aspects of research ethics discussed in this chapter, professional researchers avoid settling for mere rote compliance with established ethical rules. Rather, they continually ask what actions would be most appropriate in protecting the interests of those being studied.

## Deception

We've seen that the handling of subjects' identities is an important ethical consideration. Handling your own identity as a researcher can also be tricky. Sometimes it's useful and even necessary to identify yourself as a researcher to those you want to study. You'd have to be an experienced con artist to get people to participate in a laboratory experiment or complete a lengthy questionnaire without letting on that you were conducting research.

Even when you must conceal your research identity, you need to consider the following. Because deceiving people is unethical, deception within social research needs to be justified by compelling scientific or administrative concerns. Even then, the justification will be arguable.

Sometimes researchers admit that they're doing research but fudge about why they're doing it or for whom. Suppose you've been asked by a public welfare agency to conduct a study of living standards among aid recipients. Even if the agency is looking for ways of improving conditions, the recipient-subjects are likely to fear a witch hunt for "cheaters." They might be tempted, therefore, to give answers that make

them seem more destitute than they really are. Unless they provide truthful answers, however, the study will not produce accurate data that will contribute to an improvement of living conditions. What do you do?

One solution would be to tell subjects that you're conducting the study as part of a university research program—concealing your affiliation with the welfare agency. Although doing that improves the scientific quality of the study, it raises serious ethical questions.

Lying about research purposes is common in laboratory experiments. Although it's difficult to conceal that you're conducting research, it's usually simple—and sometimes appropriate—to conceal your purpose. Many experiments in social psychology, for example, test the extent to which subjects will abandon the evidence of their own observations in favor of the views expressed by others. Recall Figure 2-1 (p. 41), which shows the stimulus from the classic Asch experiment—frequently replicated by psychology classes—in which subjects are shown three lines of differing lengths (A, B, and C) and asked to compare them with a fourth line (X). Subjects are then asked, "Which of the first three lines is the same length as the fourth?"

You'd probably find it a fairly simple task to identify "B" as the correct answer. Your job would be complicated, however, by the fact that several other "subjects" sitting beside you all agree that A is the same length as X! In reality, of course, the others in the experiment are the researcher's confederates, instructed to agree on the wrong answer. As we saw in Chapter 2, the purpose of the experiment is to see whether you'd give up your own judgment in favor of the group agreement. I think you can see that conformity is a useful phenomenon to study and understand, and it couldn't be studied experimentally without deceiving the subjects. We'll examine a similar situation in the discussion of a famous experiment by Stanley Milgram later in this chapter. The question is, how do we get around the ethical issue that deception is necessary for an experiment to work?

One appropriate solution researchers have found is to debrief subjects following an experiment. **Debriefing** entails interviews to discover any problems generated by the research experience so that those problems can be corrected.

**debriefing** Interviewing subjects to learn about their experience of participation in the project. This is especially important if there's a possibility that they have been damaged by that participation.



## Tips and Tools

### Ethical Issues in Research on Human Sexuality

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When studying any form of human behavior, ethical concerns are paramount. This statement may be even truer for studies of human sexuality because of the topic's highly personal, salient, and perhaps threatening nature. Concern has been expressed by the public and by legislators about human sexuality research. Three commonly discussed ethical criteria have been related specifically to research in the area of human sexuality.

**Informed Consent** This criterion emphasizes the importance of both accurately informing your subject or respondent as to the nature of the research and obtaining his or her verbal or written consent to participate. Coercion is not to be used to force participation, and subjects may terminate their involvement in the research at any time. There are many possible violations of this standard. Misrepresentation or deception may be used when describing an embarrassing or personal topic of study, because the researchers fear high rates of refusal or false data. Covert research, such as some observational studies, also violates the informed consent standard because subjects are unaware that they are being studied. Informed consent may create special problems with certain populations. For example, studies of the sexuality of children are limited by the concern that children may be cognitively and emotionally unable to give informed consent. Although there can be problems such as those discussed, most research is clearly voluntary, with informed consent from those participating.

**Right to Privacy** Given the highly personal nature of sexuality and society's tremendous concern with social control of sexuality, the right to privacy is a very important ethical concern for research in this

area. Individuals may risk losing their jobs, having family difficulties, or being ostracized by peers if certain facets of their sexual lives are revealed. This is especially true for individuals involved in sexual behavior categorized as deviant. Violations of right to privacy occur when researchers identify members of certain groups they have studied, release or share an individual's data or responses, or covertly observe sexual behavior. In most cases, right to privacy is easily maintained by the researchers. In survey research, self-administered questionnaires can be anonymous and interviews can be kept confidential. In case and observational studies, the identity of the person or group studied can be disguised in any publications. In most research methods, analysis and reporting of data should be at the group or aggregate level.

**Protection from Harm** Harm may include emotional or psychological distress, as well as physical harm. Potential for harm varies by research method; it is more likely in experimental studies where the researcher manipulates or does something to the subject than it is in observational or survey research. Emotional distress, however, is a possibility in all studies of human sexuality. Respondents may be asked questions that elicit anxiety, dredge up unpleasant memories, or cause them to evaluate themselves critically. Researchers can reduce the potential for such distress during a study by using anonymous, self-administered questionnaires or well-trained interviewers, and by wording sensitive questions carefully.

All three of these ethical criteria are quite subjective. Violations are sometimes justified by arguing that risks to subjects are outweighed by benefits to society. The issue here, of course, is who makes that critical decision. Usually, such decisions are made by the researcher and often a screening committee that deals with ethical concerns. Most creative researchers have been able to follow all three ethical guidelines and still do important research.

Even though subjects can't be told the true purpose of the study prior to their participation in it, there's usually no reason they can't know afterward. Telling them the truth afterward may make up for having to lie to them at the outset. This must be done with care, however, making sure the subjects aren't left with bad feelings or doubts about themselves based on their performance in the experiment. If this seems complicated, it's simply the price we pay for using other people's lives as the subject matter for our research.

As a social researcher, then, you have many ethical obligations to the subjects in your studies. The Tips and Tools box, "Ethical Issues in Research

on Human Sexuality," illustrates some of the ethical questions involved in a specific research area.

### Analysis and Reporting

In addition to their ethical obligations to subjects, researchers have ethical obligations to their colleagues in the scientific community. These obligations concern the analysis of data and the way the results are reported.

In any rigorous study, the researcher should be more familiar than anyone else with the study's technical limitations and failures. Researchers have an obligation to make such

shortcomings known to their readers—even if admitting qualifications and mistakes makes them feel foolish.

Negative findings, for example, should be reported if they are at all related to the analysis. There is an unfortunate myth in scientific reporting that only positive discoveries are worth reporting (journal editors are sometimes guilty of believing this as well). In science, however, it's often as important to know that two variables are not related as to know that they are.

Similarly, researchers must avoid the temptation to save face by describing their findings as the product of a carefully preplanned analytic strategy when that is not the case. Many findings arrive unexpectedly—even though they may seem obvious in retrospect. So an interesting relationship was uncovered by accident—so what? Embroidering such situations with descriptions of fictitious hypotheses is dishonest. It also does a disservice to less-experienced researchers by leading them into thinking that all scientific inquiry is rigorously preplanned and organized.

Unfortunately, some “researchers” go several steps further into dishonesty. Chapter 17 will deal with the problem of plagiarism—claiming someone else’s work as your own—but every now and then you will read about cases in which claims to having conducted scientific studies are completely fraudulent and fictional. A recent example involved a Dutch psychology professor and dean who published a number of articles of popular interest—for example, one “study” linked meat eating to selfishness; another claimed that public trash led to racist behavior—but it turned out that the research he described never took place (Bhattacharjee 2013). Although such misbehavior constitutes a small fraction of published research, it is common enough to warrant an online monitor of fraudulent research, Retraction Watch, which cites published research reports that have subsequently been retracted because of plagiarism, falsified data, or other reasons. <http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com>.

In general, science progresses through honesty and openness; ego defenses and deception retard it. Researchers can best serve their peers—and scientific discovery as a whole—by telling the truth about all the pitfalls and problems

they’ve experienced in a particular line of inquiry. Perhaps they’ll save others from the same problems.

Finally, there is a sense in which simple carelessness or sloppiness can be considered an ethical problem. If the research project uses up limited resources and/or imposes on subjects with no benefit produced by the research, many in the research community would consider that an ethical violation. This is not to say that all research must produce positive results, but it should be conducted in a manner that promotes that possibility.

## Institutional Review Boards

As described earlier in this chapter, the issue of research ethics in studies involving humans is now also governed by federal law. Any agency (such as a university or a hospital) wishing to receive federal research support must establish an Institutional Review Board (IRB), a panel of faculty (and possibly others) who review all research proposals involving human subjects so that they can guarantee that the subjects’ rights and interests will be protected. Although the law applies specifically to federally funded research, many universities apply the same standards and procedures to all research, including that funded by nonfederal sources and even research done at no cost, such as student projects.

The chief responsibility of an IRB is to ensure that the risks faced by human participants in research are minimal. In some cases, the IRB may ask the researcher to revise the study design; in others, the IRB may refuse to approve a study. Where some minimal risks are deemed unavoidable, researchers are required to prepare an “informed consent” form that describes those risks clearly. Subjects may participate in the study only after they have read the statement and signed it as an indication that they know the risks and voluntarily accept them.

Much of the impetus for establishing IRBs had to do with medical experimentation on humans, and many social research study designs are generally regarded as exempt from IRB review. An example is an anonymous survey sent to a large sample of respondents. The guideline to be followed by IRBs, as contained in the

Federal Exemption Categories (45 CFR 46.101 [b]), exempts a variety of research situations:

(1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:

- (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and
- (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

(3) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under paragraph (b)(2) of this section, if:

- (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) Federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

(4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

(5) Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of Department or Agency heads, and

which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine:

- (i) Public benefit or service programs;
- (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs;
- (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or
- (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.

(6) Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Paragraph (2) of the excerpt exempts much of the social research described in this book. Nonetheless, universities sometimes apply the law's provisions inappropriately. As chair of a university IRB, for example, I was once asked to review the letter of informed consent that was to be sent to medical insurance companies, requesting their agreement to participate in a survey that would ask which medical treatments were covered under their programs. Clearly the humans involved were not at risk in the sense anticipated by the law. In a case like that, the appropriate technique for gaining informed consent is to mail the questionnaire. If a company returns it, they've consented. If they don't, they haven't.

Other IRBs have suggested that researchers need to obtain permission before observing participants in public gatherings and events, before conducting surveys on the most mundane matters, and so forth. Christopher Shea (2000) has chronicled several such questionable applications of the law while supporting the ethical logic that originally prompted the law.

Don't think that these critiques of IRBs minimize the importance of protecting human subjects. Indeed, some universities exceed the federal requirements in reasonable and responsible ways: requiring IRB review of non-federally

funded projects. Moreover, social researchers are particularly careful when dealing with vulnerable populations, such as young people and prisoners.

Research ethics is an ever-evolving subject, because new research techniques often require revisiting old concerns. Thus, for example, the increased use of public databases for secondary research has caused some IRBs to worry whether they need to reexamine such projects as the General Social Survey every time a researcher proposes to use those data. (Most have decided this is unnecessary; see Skedsvold 2002 for a discussion of issues relating to public databases.)

Similarly, the prospects for research of and through the Internet has raised ethical concerns. For example, the American Association for the Advancement of Science held a workshop on this topic as early as November 1999. The overall conclusion of the report produced by the workshop is still valid today and summarizes some of the primary concerns already examined in this chapter:

The current ethical and legal framework for protecting human subjects rests on the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice. The first principle, autonomy, requires that subjects be treated with respect as autonomous agents and affirms that those persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to special protection. In practice, this principle is reflected in the process of informed consent, in which the risks and benefits of the research are disclosed to the subject. The second principle, beneficence, involves maximizing possible benefits and good for the subject, while minimizing the amount of possible harm and risks resulting from the research. Since the fruits of knowledge can come at a cost to those participating in research, the last principle, justice, seeks a fair distribution of the burdens and benefits associated with research, so that certain individuals or groups do not bear disproportionate risks while others reap the benefits.

*(Frankel and Siang 1999: 2–3)*

The comments about research ethics and institutional review boards do not apply only to American research. Martyn Hammersley and Anna Traianou (2011) describe many of the same issues and problems in the case of British social researchers and the Research Ethics

Committees (REC). Moreover, they report special problems faced by qualitative researchers, whose research designs may evolve over the course of a study. In some cases, the RECs have insisted on monitoring the ethical aspects of such research throughout the course of a study.

## Professional Codes of Ethics

Ethical issues in social research are both important and ambiguous. For this reason, most of the professional associations of social researchers have created and published formal codes of conduct describing what is considered acceptable and unacceptable professional behavior. As one example, Figure 3-1 presents a portion of the code of conduct of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), an interdisciplinary research association in the social sciences. Most professional associations have such codes of ethics. See, for example, the American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Political Science Association, and so forth. You can find many of these on each association's website. In addition, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) has a code of ethics accessible online. The excerpt presented details several pseudoresearch practices that are denounced by AAPOR and other professional research organizations.

## Two Ethical Controversies

As you may already have guessed, the adoption and publication of professional codes of conduct have not totally resolved the issue of research ethics. Social researchers still disagree on some general principles, and those who agree in principle often debate specifics.

This section briefly describes two research projects that have provoked ethical controversy and discussion. The first project studied homosexual behavior in public restrooms, and the second examined obedience in a laboratory setting.

### Trouble in the Tearoom

As a graduate student, Laud Humphreys became interested in the study of homosexual behavior. He developed a special interest in the casual and fleeting same-sex acts engaged in by some male

### AAPOR CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND PRACTICE

We—the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and its affiliated chapters—subscribe to the principles expressed in the following Code. Our goals are to support sound and ethical practice in the conduct of survey and public opinion research and in the use of such research for policy- and decision-making in the public and private sectors, as well as to improve public understanding of survey and public opinion research methods and the proper use of those research results.

We pledge ourselves to maintain high standards of scientific competence, integrity, and transparency in conducting, analyzing, and reporting our work; establishing and maintaining relations with survey respondents and our clients; and communicating with those who eventually use the research for decision-making purposes and the general public. We further pledge ourselves to reject all tasks or assignments that would require activities inconsistent with the principles of this Code.

The Code describes the obligations that we believe all research professionals have, regardless of their membership in this Association or any other, to uphold the credibility of survey and public opinion research.

It shall not be the purpose of this Code to pass judgment on the merits of specific research methods. From time to time, the AAPOR Executive Council may issue guidelines and recommendations on best practices with regard to the design, conduct, and reporting of surveys and other forms of public opinion research.

#### I. Principles of Professional Responsibility in Our Dealings with People

##### A. Respondents and Prospective Respondents

1. We shall avoid practices or methods that may harm, endanger, humiliate, or seriously mislead survey respondents or prospective respondents.
2. We shall respect respondents' desires, when expressed, not to answer specific survey questions or provide other information to the researcher. We shall be responsive to their questions about how their contact information was secured.
3. Participation in surveys and other forms of public opinion research is voluntary, except for the decennial census and a few other government surveys as specified by law. We shall provide all persons selected for inclusion with a description of the research study sufficient to permit them to make an informed and free decision about their participation. We shall make no false or misleading claims as to a study's sponsorship or purpose, and we shall provide truthful answers to direct questions about the research. If disclosure could substantially bias responses or endanger interviewers, it is sufficient to indicate that some information cannot be revealed or will not be revealed until the study is concluded.
4. We shall not misrepresent our research or conduct other activities (such as sales, fundraising, or political campaigning) under the guise of conducting survey and public opinion research.
5. Unless the respondent explicitly waives confidentiality for specified uses, we shall hold as privileged and confidential all information that could be used, alone or in combination with other reasonably available information, to identify a respondent with his or her responses. We also shall not disclose or use the names of respondents or any other personally-identifying information for non-research purposes unless the respondents grant us permission to do so.
6. We understand that the use of our research results in a legal proceeding does not relieve us of our ethical obligation to keep confidential all respondent-identifying information (unless waived explicitly by the respondent) or lessen the importance of respondent confidentiality.

##### B. Clients or Sponsors

1. When undertaking work for a private client, we shall hold confidential all proprietary information obtained about the client and about the conduct and findings of the research undertaken for the client, except when the dissemination of the information is expressly authorized by the client, or when disclosure becomes necessary under the terms of Section I-C or III-E of this Code. In the latter case, disclosures shall be limited to information directly bearing on the conduct and findings of the research.
2. We shall be mindful of the limitations of our techniques and capabilities and shall accept only those research assignments that we can reasonably expect to accomplish within these limitations.

**FIGURE 3-1**

Code of Ethics of the American Association for Public Opinion Research

Source: From AAPOR Code of Ethics, 2010 © 2010 AAPOR. Reprinted by permission. [http://www.aapor.org/AAPOR\\_Code/2401.htm](http://www.aapor.org/AAPOR_Code/2401.htm)

C. The Public

1. We shall inform those for whom we conduct publicly released research studies that AAPOR Standards for Disclosure require the release of certain essential information about how the research was conducted, and we shall make all reasonable efforts to encourage clients to subscribe to our standards for such disclosure in their releases.
2. We shall correct any errors in our own work that come to our attention which could influence interpretation of the results, disseminating such corrections to all original recipients of our content.
3. We shall attempt, as practicable, to correct factual misrepresentations or distortions of our data or analysis, including those made by our research partners, co-investigators, sponsors, or clients. We recognize that differences of opinion in analysis are not necessarily factual misrepresentations or distortions. We shall issue corrective statements to all parties who were presented with the factual misrepresentations or distortions, and if such factual misrepresentations or distortions were made publicly, we shall correct them in as commensurate a public forum as is practicably possible.

D. The Profession

1. We recognize our responsibility to the science of survey and public opinion research to disseminate as freely as practicable the ideas and findings that emerge from our research.
2. We can point with pride to our membership in the Association and our adherence to this Code as evidence of our commitment to high standards of ethics in our relations with respondents, our clients or sponsors, the public, and the profession. However, we shall not cite our membership in the Association nor adherence to this Code as evidence of professional competence, because the Association does not so certify any persons or organizations.

II. *Principles of Professional Practice in the Conduct of Our Work*

A. We shall exercise due care in developing research designs and instruments, and in collecting, processing, and analyzing data, taking all reasonable steps to assure the reliability and validity of results.

1. We shall recommend and employ only those tools and methods of analysis that, in our professional judgment, are well suited to the research problem at hand.
2. We shall not knowingly select research tools and methods of analysis that yield misleading conclusions.
3. We shall not knowingly make interpretations of research results that are inconsistent with the data available, nor shall we tacitly permit such interpretations. We shall ensure that any findings we report, either privately or for public release, are a balanced and accurate portrayal of research results.
4. We shall not knowingly imply that interpretations should be accorded greater confidence than the data actually warrant. When we use samples to make statements about populations, we shall only make claims of precision that are warranted by the sampling frames and methods employed. For example, the reporting of a margin of sampling error based on an opt-in or self-selected volunteer sample is misleading.
5. We shall not knowingly engage in fabrication or falsification.
6. We shall accurately describe survey and public opinion research from other sources that we cite in our work, in terms of its methodology, content, and comparability.

B. We shall describe our methods and findings accurately and in appropriate detail in all research reports, adhering to the standards for disclosure specified in Section III.

III. *Standards for Disclosure*

Good professional practice imposes the obligation upon all survey and public opinion researchers to disclose certain essential information about how the research was conducted. When conducting publicly released research studies, full and complete disclosure to the public is best made at the time results are released, although some information may not be immediately available. When undertaking work for a private client, the same essential information should be made available to the client when the client is provided with the results.

A. We shall include the following items in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report.

1. Who sponsored the research study, who conducted it, and who funded it, including, to the extent known, all original funding sources.
2. The exact wording and presentation of questions and responses whose results are reported.

**FIGURE 3-1**

(Continued)

3. A definition of the population under study, its geographic location, and a description of the sampling frame used to identify this population. If the sampling frame was provided by a third party, the supplier shall be named. If no frame or list was utilized, this shall be indicated.
  4. A description of the sample design, giving a clear indication of the method by which the respondents were selected (or self-selected) and recruited, along with any quotas or additional sample selection criteria applied within the survey instrument or post-fielding. The description of the sampling frame and sample design should include sufficient detail to determine whether the respondents were selected using probability or non-probability methods.
  5. Sample sizes and a discussion of the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error for probability samples and a description of the variables used in any weighting or estimating procedures. The discussion of the precision of the findings should state whether or not the reported margins of sampling error or statistical analyses have been adjusted for the design effect due to clustering and weighting, if any.
  6. Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than on the total sample, and the size of such parts.
  7. Method and dates of data collection.
- B. We shall make the following items available within 30 days of any request for such materials.
1. Preceding interviewer or respondent instructions and any preceding questions or instructions that might reasonably be expected to influence responses to the reported results.
  2. Any relevant stimuli, such as visual or sensory exhibits or show cards.
  3. A description of the sampling frame's coverage of the target population.
  4. The methods used to recruit the panel, if the sample was drawn from a pre-recruited panel or pool of respondents.
  5. Details about the sample design, including eligibility for participation, screening procedures, the nature of any oversamples, and compensation/incentives offered (if any).
  6. Summaries of the disposition of study-specific sample records so that response rates for probability samples and participation rates for non-probability samples can be computed.
  7. Sources of weighting parameters and method by which weights are applied.
  8. Procedures undertaken to verify data. Where applicable, methods of interviewer training, supervision, and monitoring shall also be disclosed.
- C. If response rates are reported, response rates should be computed according to AAPOR Standard Definitions.
- D. If the results reported are based on multiple samples or multiple modes, the preceding items shall be disclosed for each.
- E. If any of our work becomes the subject of a formal investigation of an alleged violation of this Code, undertaken with the approval of the AAPOR Executive Council, we shall provide additional information on the research study in such detail that a fellow researcher would be able to conduct a professional evaluation of the study.

**FIGURE 3-1**

(Continued)

nonhomosexuals. In particular, his research interest focused on homosexual acts between strangers meeting in the public restrooms in parks, called “tearooms” among homosexuals. The result was the publication in 1970 of the classic *Tearoom Trade*.

What particularly interested Humphreys about the tearoom activity was that the participants seemed otherwise to live conventional lives as “family men” and accepted members of the community. They did nothing else that might qualify them as homosexuals. Thus, it was important to them that they remain anonymous

in their tearoom visits. How would you study something like that?

Humphreys decided to take advantage of the social structure of the situation. Typically, the tearoom encounter involved three people: the two men actually engaging in the sexual act and a look-out, called the “watchqueen.” Humphreys began showing up at public restrooms, offering to serve as watchqueen whenever it seemed appropriate. Because the watchqueen’s payoff was the chance to watch the action, Humphreys was able to conduct field observations as he would in a study of political rallies or jaywalking behavior at intersections.



To round out his understanding of the tearoom trade, Humphreys needed to know something more about the people who participated. Because the men probably would not have been thrilled about being interviewed, Humphreys developed a different solution. Whenever possible, he noted the license numbers of participants' cars and tracked down their names and addresses through the police. Humphreys then visited the men at their homes, disguising himself enough to avoid recognition, and announced that he was conducting a survey. In that fashion, he collected the personal information he couldn't get in the restrooms.

As you can imagine, Humphreys' research provoked considerable controversy both inside and outside the social science community. Some critics charged Humphreys with a gross invasion of privacy in the name of science. What men did in public restrooms was their own business. Others were mostly concerned about the deceit involved—Humphreys had lied to the participants by leading them to believe he was only a voyeur-participant. Even people who felt that the tearoom participants were fair game for observation because they used a public facility protested the follow-up survey. They claimed it was unethical for Humphreys to trace the participants to their homes and to interview them under false pretenses.

Still others justified Humphreys' research. The topic, they said, was worth study. It couldn't be studied any other way, and they regarded the deceit as essentially harmless, noting that Humphreys was careful not to harm his subjects by disclosing their tearoom activities. One result of Humphreys' research was to challenge some of the common stereotypes about the participants in anonymous sexual encounters in public places, showing them to be basically conventional in other aspects of their lives.

The *Tearoom Trade* controversy has never been resolved. It's still debated, and it probably always will be because it stirs emotions and involves ethical issues people disagree about. What do you think? Was Humphreys ethical in doing what he did? Are there parts of the research that you believe were acceptable and other parts that were not?

## Observing Human Obedience

The second illustration differs from the first in many ways. Whereas Humphreys' study

involved participant observation, this study took place in the laboratory. Humphreys' study was sociological, this one psychological. And whereas Humphreys examined behavior considered by many to be deviant, the researcher in this study examined obedience and conformity.

One of the most unsettling clichés to come out of World War II was the German soldier's common excuse for atrocities: "I was only following orders." From the point of view that gave rise to this comment, any behavior—no matter how reprehensible—could be justified if someone else could be assigned responsibility for it. If a superior officer ordered a soldier to kill a baby, the fact of the order supposedly exempted the soldier from personal responsibility for the action.

Although the military tribunals that tried the war-crime cases did not accept this excuse, social researchers and others have recognized the extent to which this point of view pervades social life. People often seem willing to do things they know would be considered wrong, if they can claim that some higher authority ordered them to do it. Such was the pattern of justification in the 1968 My Lai tragedy of Vietnam, when U.S. soldiers killed more than 300 unarmed civilians—some of them young children—simply because their village, My Lai, was believed to be a Viet Cong stronghold. This sort of justification appears less dramatically in day-to-day civilian life. Few would disagree that this reliance on authority exists, yet Stanley Milgram's classic study (1963, 1965) of the topic provoked considerable controversy.

To observe people's willingness to harm others when following orders, Milgram brought 40 adult men from many different walks of life into a laboratory setting designed to create the phenomenon under study. If you had been a subject in the experiment, you would have had something like the following experience.

You've been informed that you and another subject are about to participate in a learning experiment. Through a draw of lots, you're assigned the job of "teacher" and your fellow subject the job of "pupil." The pupil is led into another room and strapped into a chair; an electrode is attached to his wrist. As the teacher, you're seated in front of an impressive electric control panel covered with dials, gauges, and switches. You notice that each switch has a label giving a different number of volts, ranging from 15 to 315. The switches

have other labels, too, some with the ominous phrases “Extreme-Intensity Shock,” “Danger—Severe Shock,” and “XXX.”

The experiment runs like this. You read a list of word pairs to the learner and then test his ability to match them up. Because you can’t see him, a light on your control panel indicates his answer. Whenever the learner makes a mistake, you’re instructed by the experimenter to throw one of the switches—beginning with the mildest—and administer a shock to your pupil. Through an open door between the two rooms, you hear your pupil’s response to the shock. Then you read another list of word pairs and test him again.

As the experiment progresses, you administer ever more intense shocks, until your pupil screams for mercy and begs for the experiment to end. You’re instructed to administer the next shock anyway. After a while, your pupil begins kicking the wall between the two rooms and continues to scream. The implacable experimenter tells you to give the next shock. Finally, you read a list and ask for the pupil’s answer—but there is no reply, only silence from the other room. The experimenter informs you that no answer is considered an error and instructs you to administer the next higher shock. This continues up to the “XXX” shock at the end of the series.

What do you suppose you really would have done when the pupil first began screaming? When he began kicking on the wall? Or when he became totally silent and gave no indication of life? You’d refuse to continue giving shocks, right? And surely the same would be true of most people.

So we might think—but Milgram found otherwise. Of the first 40 adult men Milgram tested, nobody refused to continue administering the shocks until they heard the pupil begin kicking the wall between the two rooms. Of the 40, only 5 did so then. Two-thirds of the subjects, 26 of the 40, continued doing as they were told through the entire series—up to and including the administration of the highest shock.

As you’ve probably guessed, the shocks were phony, and the “pupil” was a confederate of the experimenter. Only the “teacher” was a real subject in the experiment. As a subject, you wouldn’t actually have been hurting another person, but you would have been led to think you were. The experiment was designed to test

your willingness to follow orders to the point of presumably killing someone.

Milgram’s experiments have been criticized both methodologically and ethically. On the ethical side, critics have particularly cited the effects of the experiment on the subjects. Many seemed to have experienced personally about as much pain as they thought they were administering to someone else. They pleaded with the experimenter to let them stop giving the shocks. They became extremely upset and nervous. Some had uncontrollable seizures.

How do you feel about this research? Do you think the topic was important enough to justify such measures? Would debriefing the subjects be sufficient to ameliorate any possible harm? Can you think of other ways the researcher might have examined obedience?

The websites of two organizations may be helpful in your understanding of ethics in research. In recognition of the importance of ethical issues in social inquiry, the American Sociological Association has posted a website entitled, “Teaching Ethics throughout the Curriculum,” which contains a wide variety of case studies as well as resources for dealing with them. Also, the National Institutes of Health has established an online course regarding the history, issues, and processes regarding human-subjects research. While it was specifically designed for researchers seeking federal funding for research, it is available to and useful for anyone with an interest in this topic.

## The Politics of Social Research

As I indicated earlier, both ethics and politics hinge on ideological points of view. What is unacceptable from one point of view will be acceptable from another. Although political and ethical issues are often closely intertwined, I want to distinguish between them in two ways.

First, the ethics of social research deals mostly with the methods employed; political issues tend to center on the substance and use of research. Thus, for example, some critics raise ethical objections to the Milgram experiments, saying that the methods harm the subjects. A political objection would be that obedience is not a suitable topic for study, either because (1) we should not tinker

with people's willingness to follow orders from higher authority or (2), from the opposite political point of view, because the results of the research could be used to make people *more* obedient.

The second distinction between the ethical and political aspects of social research is that there are no formal codes of accepted political conduct. Although some ethical norms have political aspects—for example, specific guidelines for not harming subjects clearly relate to Western ideas about the protection of civil liberties—no one has developed a set of political norms that all social researchers accept.

The only partial exception to the lack of political norms is the generally accepted view that a researcher's personal political orientation should not interfere with or unduly influence his or her scientific research. It would be considered improper for a researcher to use shoddy techniques or to distort or lie about his or her research as a way of furthering the researcher's political views. As you can imagine, however, studies are often enough attacked for allegedly violating this norm.

## Objectivity and Ideology

In Chapter 1, I suggested that social research can never be totally objective because researchers are human and therefore necessarily subjective. As a collective enterprise, science achieves the equivalent of objectivity through intersubjectivity. That is, different scientists, having different subjective views, can and should arrive at the same results when they employ accepted research techniques. Essentially, this will happen to the extent that each can set personal values and views aside for the duration of the research.

The classic statement on objectivity and neutrality in social science is Max Weber's lecture "Science as a Vocation" ([1925] 1946). In this talk, Weber coined the phrase *value-free sociology* and urged that sociology, like other sciences, needed to be unencumbered by personal values if it were to make a special contribution to society. Liberals and conservatives alike could recognize the "facts" of social science, regardless of how those facts accorded with their personal politics.

Most social researchers have agreed with this abstract ideal, but not all. Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars, for example, have argued that social science and social action cannot and should

not be separated. Explanations of the status quo in society, they contend, shade subtly into defenses of that same status quo. Simple explanations of the social functions of, say, discrimination can easily become justifications for its continuance. By the same token, merely studying society and its ills without a commitment to making society more humane has been called irresponsible.

In Chapter 10, we'll examine *participatory action research*, which is explicitly committed to using social research for purposes designed and valued by the subjects of the research. Thus, for example, researchers committed to improving the working conditions for workers at a factory would ask the workers to define the outcomes they would like to see and to have a hand in conducting social research relevant to achieving the desired ends. The role of the researchers is to ensure that the workers have access to professional research methods.

Quite aside from abstract disagreements about whether social science can or *should* be value-free, many have argued about whether particular research undertakings *are* value-free or whether they represent an intrusion of the researcher's own political values. Typically, researchers have denied such intrusion, and their denials have then been challenged. Let's look at some examples of the controversies this issue has produced.

## Social Research and Race

Nowhere have social research and politics been more controversially intertwined than in the area of racial relations. Social researchers studied the topic for a long time, and the products of the social research have often found their way into practical politics. A few brief references should illustrate the point.

In 1896, when the U.S. Supreme Court established the principle of "separate but equal" as a means of reconciling the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equality to African Americans with the norms of segregation, it neither asked for nor cited social research. Nonetheless, it is widely believed that the Court was influenced by the writings of William Graham Sumner, a leading social scientist of his era. Sumner was noted for his view that the mores and folkways of a society were relatively impervious to legislation and social planning. His view has often

been paraphrased as “stateways do not make folkways.” Thus, the Court ruled that it could not accept the assumption that “social prejudices may be overcome by legislation” and denied the wisdom of “laws which conflict with the general sentiment of the community” (Blaunstein and Zangrando 1970: 308). As many a politician has said, “You can’t legislate morality.”

When the doctrine of “separate but equal” was overturned in 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Education*), the new Supreme Court decision was based in part on the conclusion that segregation had a detrimental effect on African American children. In drawing that conclusion, the Court cited several sociological and psychological research reports (Blaunstein and Zangrando 1970).

For the most part, social researchers in this century have supported the cause of African American equality in the United States, and their convictions often have been the impetus for their research. Moreover, they’ve hoped that their research will lead to social change. There is no doubt, for example, that Gunnar Myrdal’s classic two-volume study (1944) of race relations in the United States had a significant impact on the topic of his research. Myrdal amassed a great deal of data to show that the position of African Americans directly contradicted U.S. values of social and political equality. Further, Myrdal did not attempt to hide his own point of view in the matter. (You can pursue Myrdal’s landmark research further online by searching for “Gunnar Myrdal” or “An American Dilemma.”)

Many social researchers have become directly involved in the civil rights movement, some more radically than others. Given the broad support for ideals of equality, research conclusions supporting the cause of equality draw little or no criticism. To recognize how solid the general social science position is in this matter, we need only examine a few research projects that have produced conclusions disagreeing with the predominant ideological position.

Most social researchers have—overtly, at least—supported the end of school segregation. Thus, an immediate and heated controversy arose in 1966 when James Coleman, a respected sociologist, published the results of a major national study of race and education. Contrary to general agreement, Coleman found little difference in academic performance between African

American students attending integrated schools and those attending segregated ones. Indeed, such obvious things as libraries, laboratory facilities, and high expenditures per student made little difference. Instead, Coleman reported that family and neighborhood factors had the most influence on academic achievement.

Coleman’s findings were not well received by many of the social researchers who had been active in the civil rights movement. Some scholars criticized Coleman’s work on methodological grounds, but many others objected hotly on the grounds that the findings would have segregationist political consequences. The controversy that raged around the Coleman report was reminiscent of that provoked a year earlier by Daniel Moynihan (1965) in his critical analysis of the African American family in the United States. Whereas some felt Moynihan was blaming the victims, others objected to his tracing those problems to the legacy of slavery.

Another example of political controversy surrounding social research in connection with race concerns IQ scores. In 1969, Arthur Jensen, a Harvard psychologist, was asked to prepare an article for the *Harvard Educational Review* examining the data on racial differences in IQ test results (Jensen 1969). In the article, Jensen concluded that genetic differences between African Americans and whites accounted for the lower average IQ scores of African Americans. Jensen became so identified with that position that he appeared on college campuses across the country discussing it.

Jensen’s research has been attacked on numerous methodological bases. Critics charged that much of the data on which Jensen’s conclusion was based were inadequate and sloppy—there are many IQ tests, some worse than others. Similarly, it was argued that Jensen had not taken social-environmental factors sufficiently into account. Other social researchers raised still other methodological objections.

Beyond the scientific critique, however, many condemned Jensen as a racist. Hostile crowds booed him, drowning out his public presentations. Ironically, Jensen’s reception by several university audiences was ironically reminiscent of the hostile reception received by abolitionists over a century before, when the prevailing opinion favored leaving the institution of slavery intact.

Many social researchers limited their objections to the Moynihan, Coleman, and Jensen research to scientific, methodological grounds. The political firestorms ignited by these studies, however, point out how ideology often shows up in matters of social research. Although the abstract model of science is divorced from ideology, the practice of science is not.

To examine another version of the controversy surrounding race and achievement, search the web for differing points of view concerning “The Bell Curve”—sparked by a book with that title by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994).

The controversies relating to research and race continue at present, as we saw in the Chapter 2 discussion of critical race theory.

### The Politics of Sexual Research

As I indicated earlier, the Laud Humphreys’ study of tearoom trade raised ethical issues that researchers still discuss and debate. At the same time, it seems clear that much of the furor raised by the research was related to the subject matter itself. As I have written elsewhere,

Laud Humphreys didn’t just study S-E-X but observed and discussed *homosexuality*. And it wasn’t even the caring-and-committed-relationships-between-two-people-who-just-happen-to-be-of-the-same-sex homosexuality but tawdry encounters between strangers in public toilets. Only adding the sacrifice of Christian babies could have made this more inflammatory for the great majority of Americans in 1970.

(Babbie 2004: 12)

Whereas Humphreys’ research topic proved unusually provocative for many, much tamer sexuality research has also engendered outcries of public horror. During the 1940s and 1950s, the biologist Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues published landmark studies of sexual practices of American men (1948) and women (1953). Kinsey’s extensive interviewing allowed him to report on frequency of sexual activity, premarital and extramarital sex, homosexual behavior, and so forth. His studies produced public outrage and efforts to close his research institute at Indiana University.

Although today most people no longer get worked up about the Kinsey reports, Americans tend to remain touchy about research on sex. In 1987, the National Institutes of Health (NIH),

charged with finding ways to combat the AIDS epidemic, found they needed hard data on contemporary sexual practices if they were to design effective anti-AIDS programs. Their request for research proposals resulted in a sophisticated study design by Edward O. Laumann and colleagues. The proposed study focused on the different patterns of sexual activity characterizing different periods of life, and it received rave reviews from the NIH and their consultants.

Enter Senator Jesse Helms (R-North Carolina) and Congressman William Dannemeyer (R-California). In 1989, having learned of the Laumann study, Helms and Dannemeyer began a campaign to block the study and shift the same amount of money to a teen abstinence-only program. Anne Fausto-Sterling, a biologist, sought to understand the opposition to the Laumann study.

The surveys, Helms argued, are not really intended “to stop the spread of AIDS. The real purpose is to compile supposedly scientific facts to support the left-wing liberal argument that homosexuality is a normal, acceptable life-style. . . . As long as I am able to stand on the floor of the U.S. Senate,” he added, “I am never going to yield to that sort of thing, because it is not just another life-style; it is sodomy.”

(Fausto-Sterling 1992)

Helms won a 66–34 vote in favor of his amendment in the U.S. Senate. Although the House of Representatives rejected the amendment, and it was dropped in conference committee, government funding for the study was put on hold. Laumann and his colleagues then turned to the private sector and obtained funding, albeit for a smaller study, from private foundations. Their research results were published in 1994 as *The Social Organization of Sexuality*.

### Politics and the Census

There is probably a political dimension to every attempt to study human social behavior. Consider the matter of the U.S. decennial census, mandated by the Constitution. The original purpose was to discover the population sizes of the various states to determine their proper representation in the House of Representatives. Whereas each state gets two senators, large states get more representatives than small ones do. So what could be simpler? Just count the number of people in each state.

From the beginning, there was nothing simple about counting heads in a dispersed, national population like the United States. Even the definition of a “person” was anything but straightforward. A slave, for example, counted as only three-fifths of a person for purposes of the census. This decreased the representation of the slaveholding Southern states, though counting slaves as whole people might have raised the dangerously radical idea that they should be allowed to vote.

Further, the logistical problems of counting people who reside in suburban tract houses, urban apartments, college dorms, military barracks, farms, cabins in the woods, and illegal housing units, as well as counting those who have no place to live, not to mention undocumented immigrants, has always presented a daunting task. It’s the sort of challenge social researchers tackle with relish. However, the difficulty of finding the hard-to-reach and the techniques created for doing so cannot escape the political net.

Kenneth Prewitt, who directed the Census Bureau from 1998 to 2001, describes some of the political aspects of counting heads:

Between 1910 and 1920, there was a massive wartime population movement from the rural, Southern states to industrial Northern cities. In 1920, for the first time in American history, the census included more city dwellers than rural residents. An urban America was something new and disturbing, especially to those who held to the Jeffersonian belief that independent farmers best protected democracy. Among those of this persuasion were rural, conservative congressmen in the South and West. They saw that reapportionment would shift power to factory-based unions and politically radical immigrants concentrated in Northeastern cities. Conservatives in Congress blocked reapportionment, complaining among other things that because January 1 was then census day, transient agricultural workers were “incorrectly” counted in cities rather than on the farms to which they would return in time for spring planting. (Census Day was later shifted to April 1, where it has remained.) The arguments dragged out for a decade, and Congress was not reapportioned until after the next census.

*(Prewitt 2003)*

In more-recent years, concern for undercounting the urban poor has become a political issue. The big cities, which have the most to lose from the undercounting, typically vote Democratic rather than Republican, so you can probably guess which party supports efforts to improve the counting and which party is less enthusiastic. By the same token, when social scientists have argued in favor of replacing the attempt at a total enumeration of the population with modern survey sampling methods (see Chapter 7), they have enjoyed more support from Democrats, who would stand to gain from such a methodological shift, than from Republicans, who would stand to lose. Rather than suggesting Democrats support science more than Republicans do, this situation offers another example of how the political context in which we live and conduct social research often affects that research. This was apparent in debates leading up to the 2010 U.S. Census, directed by a sociologist, Robert Groves.

### Politics with a Little “p”

Social research is often confounded by political ideologies, but the “politics” of social research runs far deeper still. Social research in relation to contested social issues simply cannot remain antiseptically objective—particularly when differing ideologies are pitted against each other in a field of social science data.

The same is true when research is invoked in disputes between people with conflicting interests. For instance, social researchers who have served as “expert witnesses” in court would probably agree that the scientific ideal of a “search for truth” seems hopelessly naive in a trial or lawsuit. Although expert witnesses technically do not represent either side in court, they are, nonetheless, engaged by only one side to appear, and their testimony tends to support the side of the party who pays for their time. This doesn’t necessarily mean that these witnesses will lie on behalf of their patrons, but the contenders in a lawsuit are understandably more likely to pay for expert testimony that supports their case than for testimony that attacks it.

Thus, as an expert witness, you appear in court only because your presumably scientific and honest judgment happens to coincide with the interests of the party paying you to testify. Once you arrive in court and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the

truth, however, you find yourself in a world foreign to the ideals of objective contemplation. Suddenly, the norms are those of winning and losing. As an expert witness, of course, all you have to lose is your respectability (and perhaps the chance to earn fees as an expert witness in the future). Still, such stakes are high enough to create discomfort for most social researchers.

I recall one case in federal court when I was testifying on behalf of some civil service workers whose cost-of-living allowance (COLA) had been cut on the basis of what I thought was rather shoddy research. I was engaged to conduct “more-scientific” research that would demonstrate the injustice worked against the civil servants (Babbie 1982: 232–43).

I took the stand, feeling pretty much like a respected professor and textbook author. In short order, however, I found I had moved from the academy to the hockey rink. Tests of statistical significance and sampling error were suddenly less relevant than a slap shot. At one point, an attorney from Washington lured me into casually agreeing that I was familiar with a certain professional journal. Unfortunately, the journal did not exist. I was mortified and suddenly found myself shifting domains. Without really thinking about it, I now was less committed to being a friendly Mr. Chips and more aligned with ninja-professor. I would not be fully satisfied until I, in turn, could mortify the attorney, which I succeeded in doing.

Even though the civil servants got their cost-of-living allowance back, I have to admit I was also concerned with how I looked in front of the courtroom assemblage. I tell you this anecdote to illustrate the personal “politics” of human interactions involving presumably scientific and objective research. We need to realize that as human beings social researchers are going to act like human beings, and we must take this into account when assessing their findings. This recognition does not invalidate their research or provide an excuse for rejecting findings we happen to dislike, but it does need to be considered.

Similar questions regularly are raised outside the social sciences. For example, you have probably read reports about medical scientists whose research demonstrates the safety of a new drug—and that the research in question was paid for by the pharmaceutical company that developed

the drug and was seeking FDA approval to sell it. Perhaps the research was of the highest quality, but it’s appropriate to question whether it was tainted by a conflict of interest. Similarly, when research sponsored by the coal or petroleum industries concludes that global climate change is not a human-made problem, you shouldn’t necessarily assume the research was biased, but you should be open to that possibility. At the very least, the sponsorship of such research should be made public.

Applying these kinds of concerns to survey research, the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), in 2009, established a “Transparency Initiative,” requiring all association members and urging all other survey researchers to report openly and fully the details of their research methods. President of the AAPOR, Peter V. Miller, acknowledged that program might be in for rough sledding:

Recent events have taught us that disclosure itself can be manipulated. It is disturbingly easy to claim that polls have been conducted using particular methods, while, in truth, the work was not done or was done another way. While we must rely on the integrity of participants in the initiative, we cannot proceed on the basis of trust alone. We must develop ways to check the information we receive. The value of AAPOR’s recognition depends on it

(2010: 606)

## Politics in Perspective

Although the ethical and the political dimensions of research are in principle distinct, they do intersect. Whenever politicians or the public feel that social research is violating ethical or moral standards, they’ll be quick to respond with remedies of their own. Moreover, the standards they defend may not be those of the research community. Even when researchers support the goals of measures directed at the way research is done, the means specified by regulations or legislation can hamstring research.

Legislators show special concern for research on children. Although the social research norms discussed in this chapter would guard against bringing any physical or emotional harm to

children, some of the restrictive legislation introduced from time to time borders on the actions of one particular western city, which shall remain nameless. In response to concerns that a public school teacher had been playing New Age music in class and encouraging students to meditate, the city council passed legislation stating that no teacher could do anything that would “affect the minds of students”!

Today, the “politicization of science” is a particularly hot topic, with charges flung from both sides of the political spectrum. On the one hand, we can see renewed objections to the teaching of evolution while demands for the teaching of creationism have been replaced by support for intelligent design. In many of these regards, science is seen as a threat to religiously based views, and scientists are sometimes accused of having an antireligious agenda. On the other hand, a statement by the Union of Concerned Scientists (2005), cosigned by thousands of scientists, illustrates the concern that the concentration of political power in the hands of one party can threaten the independent functioning of scientific research:

The United States has an impressive history of investing in scientific research and respecting the independence of scientists. As a result, we have enjoyed sustained economic progress and public health, as well as unequaled leadership within the global scientific community. Recent actions by political appointees, however, threaten to undermine this legacy by preventing the best available science from informing policy decisions that have serious consequences for our health, safety, and environment.

Across a broad range of issues—from childhood lead poisoning and mercury emissions to climate change, reproductive health, and nuclear weapons—political appointees have distorted and censored scientific findings that contradict established policies. In some cases, they have manipulated the underlying science to align results with predetermined political decisions.

I hope you take away four main lessons from this discussion. First, *science is not untouched by politics*. The intrusion of politics and related ideologies is not unique to social research; the

natural sciences have experienced and continue to experience similar intrusions. But social science is particularly linked to social life. Social researchers study things that matter to people—things that people have firm, personal feelings about and that affect their lives. Moreover, researchers are human beings, and their feelings often surface in their professional lives. To think otherwise would be naive.

Second, *science manages to proceed in the midst of political controversy and hostility*. Even when researchers get angry and call each other names, or when the research community comes under attack from the outside, scientific inquiry persists. Studies are done, reports are published, and new things are learned. In short, ideological disputes do not bring science to a halt, but they do make it more challenging—and exciting.

Third, *an awareness of ideological considerations enriches the study and practice of social research methods*. Many of the established characteristics of science, such as intersubjectivity, function to cancel out or hold in check our human shortcomings, especially those we are unaware of. Otherwise, we might look into the world and never see anything but a reflection of our personal biases and beliefs.

Finally, *whereas researchers should not let their own values interfere with the quality and honesty of their research, this does not mean that researchers cannot or should not participate in public debates and express both their scientific expertise and personal values*. You can do scientifically excellent research on racial prejudice, all the while being opposed to prejudice and saying so. Some would argue that social scientists, because of their scientific expertise in the workings of society, have an obligation to speak out, rather than leaving that role to politicians, journalists, and talk-show hosts.

The term, *public sociology*, has enjoyed considerable popularity in recent years. While it is espoused by scholars who may have differing views of how sociology should impact what sectors of society, the common theme is that it should have an intentional impact. You may recall the Chapter 1 discussion of “applied” and “pure” research as a background for this movement in contemporary sociology. If you want to explore this further, you might examine a special symposium on the issue in the November 2008 journal *Contemporary Sociology*, edited by Valerie Jenness, David A. Smith, and Judith Stepan-Norris.



## MAIN POINTS

### Introduction

- In addition to technical, scientific considerations, social research projects are likely to be shaped by administrative, ethical, and political considerations.

### Ethical Issues in Social Research

- What is ethical and unethical in research is ultimately a matter of what a community of people agree is right and wrong.
- Researchers agree that participation in research should normally be voluntary. This norm, however, can conflict with the scientific need for generalizability.
- Researchers agree that research should not harm those who participate in it, unless they give their informed consent, thereby willingly and knowingly accepting the risks of harm.
- Whereas anonymity refers to the situation in which even the researcher cannot identify specific information with the individuals it describes, confidentiality refers to the situation in which the researcher promises to keep information about subjects private. The most straightforward way to ensure confidentiality is to destroy identifying information as soon as it's no longer needed.
- Many research designs involve a greater or lesser degree of deception of subjects. Because deceiving people violates common standards of ethical behavior, deception in research requires a strong justification—and even then the justification may be challenged.
- Social researchers have ethical obligations to the community of researchers as well as to subjects. These obligations include reporting results fully and accurately as well as disclosing errors, limitations, and other shortcomings in the research.
- Professional associations in several disciplines publish codes of ethics to guide researchers. These codes are necessary and helpful, but they do not resolve all ethical questions.

### Two Ethical Controversies

- Laud Humphreys' study of "tearoom" encounters and Stanley Milgram's study of obedience raise ethical issues that are debated to this day.

### The Politics of Social Research

- Social research inevitably has a political and ideological dimension. Although science is neutral on political matters, scientists are not. Moreover, much social research inevitably involves the political beliefs of people outside the research community.

- Although most researchers agree that political orientation should not unduly influence research, in practice, separating politics and ideology from the conduct of research can be quite difficult. Some researchers maintain that research can and should be an instrument of social action and change. More subtly, a shared ideology can affect the way other researchers receive one's research.
- Even though the norms of science cannot force individual researchers to give up their personal values, the intersubjective character of science provides a guard against scientific findings being the product of bias only.

## KEY TERMS

The following terms are defined in context in the chapter and at the bottom of the page where the term is introduced, as well as in the comprehensive glossary at the back of the book.

anonymity	debriefing
confidentiality	informed consent

## PROPOSING SOCIAL RESEARCH: ETHICAL ISSUES

If you are actually proposing a research project, you may be required to submit your proposal to your campus Institutional Review Board (IRB). In that case, you will need to inform yourself as to the forms and procedures involved locally. The key concern here is the protection of research subjects: avoiding harm, safeguarding subjects' privacy, and the other such topics discussed in this chapter.

In this section of the proposal, you will discuss the ethical risks involved in your study and the steps you will take to avoid them. Perhaps you will prepare forms to ensure that subjects are aware of and give *informed consent* to the risks attendant on their participation. The terms *anonymous* and/or *confidential* are likely to appear in your discussion.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Consider the following real and hypothetical research situations. What is the ethical component in each example? How do you feel about it? Do you think the procedures described are

ultimately acceptable or unacceptable? You might find discussing some of these situations with classmates useful.

- a. A psychology instructor asks students in an introductory psychology class to complete questionnaires that the instructor will analyze and use in preparing a journal article for publication.
  - b. After a field study of deviant behavior during a riot, law enforcement officials demand that the researcher identify those people who were observed looting. Rather than risk arrest as an accomplice after the fact, the researcher complies.
  - c. After completing the final draft of a book reporting a research project, the researcher-author discovers that 25 of the 2,000 survey interviews were falsified by interviewers. To protect the bulk of the research, the author leaves out this information and publishes the book.
  - d. Researchers obtain a list of right-wing radicals they wish to study. They contact the radicals with the explanation that each has been selected “at random” from among the general population to take a sampling of “public opinion.”
  - e. A college instructor, who wants to test the effect of unfair berating, administers an hour exam to both sections of a specific course. The overall performance of the two sections is essentially the same. The grades of one section are artificially lowered, however, and the instructor berates the students for performing so badly. The instructor then administers the same final exam to both sections and discovers that the performance of the unfairly berated section is worse. The hypothesis is confirmed, and the research report is published.
  - f. In a study of sexual behavior, the investigator wants to overcome subjects’ reluctance to report what they might regard as shameful behavior. To get past their reluctance, subjects are asked, “Everyone masturbates now and then; about how much do you masturbate?”
  - g. A researcher studying dorm life on campus discovers that 60 percent of the residents regularly violate restrictions on alcohol consumption. Publication of this finding would probably create a furor in the campus community. Because no extensive analysis of alcohol use is planned, the researcher decides to keep this finding quiet.
  - h. To test the extent to which people may try to save face by expressing attitudes on matters they are wholly uninformed about, the researcher asks for their attitudes regarding a fictitious issue.
    - i. A research questionnaire is circulated among students as part of their university registration packet. Although students are not told they must complete the questionnaire, the hope is that they will believe they must—thus ensuring a higher completion rate.
    - j. A researcher pretends to join a radical political group in order to study it and is successfully accepted as a member of the inner planning circle. What should the researcher do if the group makes plans for the following?
      - A peaceful, though illegal, demonstration
      - The bombing of a public building during a time it is sure to be unoccupied
      - The assassination of a public official
2. Review the discussion of the Milgram experiment on obedience. How would you design a study to accomplish the same purpose while avoiding the ethical criticisms leveled at Milgram? Would your design be equally valid? Would it have the same effect?
  3. Suppose a researcher who is personally in favor of small families—as a response to the problem of overpopulation—wants to conduct a survey to determine why some people want many children and others don’t. What personal-involvement problems would the researcher face, and how could she or he avoid them? What ethical issues should the researcher take into account in designing the survey?
  4. Do a web search for “informed consent” and then narrow your search to “research.” Skim the resulting websites and begin to identify groups of people for whom informed consent may be problematic—people who may not be able to give it. Suggest some ways in which the problem might be overcome.