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 nonresponse 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