CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH ETHICS

CHAPTER OUTLINE

ETHICS AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Most mass media research involves observations of human beings—asking them questions or examining what they have done. However, in this probing process the researcher must ensure that the rights of the participants are not violated. This concern for rights requires a consideration of **ethics**: distinguishing right from wrong and proper from improper. Unfortunately, there are no universal definitions for these terms. Instead, several guidelines, broad generalizations, and suggestions have been endorsed or at least tacitly accepted by most in the research profession. These guidelines do not provide an answer to every ethical question that may arise, but they can help make researchers more sensitive to the issues.

Before discussing these specific guidelines, let's pose some hypothetical research situations involving ethics.

- A researcher at a large university distributes questionnaires to the students in an introductory mass media course and tells them that if they do not complete the forms, they will lose points toward their grade in the course.
- A researcher is conducting a mail survey about downloading pornography from the Internet. The questionnaire states that the responses will be anonymous. However, unknown to the respondents, each return envelope is marked with a code that enables the researcher to identify the sender.
- A researcher creates a false identity on Facebook and uses it to gather information about the communication behaviors of dozens of college students without the students' knowledge.
- A researcher shows one group of children a violent television show and another group a nonviolent program. Afterward, the children are sent to a public playground, where they are told to play with the children who are already there. The researcher records each instance of violent behavior exhibited by the young subjects.
- Subjects in an experiment are told to submit a sample of their news writing to an executive of a large newspaper and are led to believe that whoever submits the best work will be offered a job at the paper. In fact, the "executive" is a confederate in the experiment and severely criticizes everyone's work. The subjects then rate their own self-esteem. They are never told about the deception.

These examples of ethically flawed study designs should be kept in mind while you read the following guidelines to ethics in mass media research.

WHY BE ETHICAL?

Ethical behavior is the right thing to do. The best reason to behave ethically is the personal knowledge that you have acted in a morally appropriate manner. In addition, there are other cogent reasons that argue for ethical behavior. Unethical behavior may have an adverse effect on research participants. Just one experience with an ethically questionable research project may completely alienate a respondent. A person who was improperly deceived into thinking that he or she was being evaluated for a job at a newspaper when it was all just an experiment might not be so willing to participate in another study. Since mass communication research depends on the continued goodwill and cooperation of respondents, it is important to shield them from unethical research practices.

Moreover, unethical research practices reflect poorly on the profession and may result in an increase in negative public opinion. Many readers have probably heard about the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study in which impoverished African American men suffering from syphilis were studied without their consent and left untreated so that researchers could study the progress of the disease (see Jones, 1981, for a complete description). The distrust and suspicion engendered by this experiment in the African American community have yet to subside and have been cited as a factor in the rise of some conspiracy theories about the spread of AIDS (Thomas & Quinn, 1981). It is fortunate that the mass communication research community has not had an ethical lapse of this magnitude, but the Tuskegee experiment illustrates the harmful fallout that can result from an unethical research project.

Unethical research usually does not result from some sinister motivation. Instead, it generally comes from pressure on researchers to cut corners in an attempt to publish an article or gain prestige or impress other colleagues. Nonetheless, it is behavior that is potentially serious and little tolerated within the community of mass media scholars.

GENERAL ETHICAL THEORIES

The problem of determining what is right and proper has been examined for hundreds of years. At least three general types of theories have evolved to suggest answers: (1) rule-based or **deontological** theories, (2) balancing or **teleological** theories, and (3) **relativistic** theories. The best-known deontological theory is the one associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant posited moral laws that constituted **categorical imperatives—** principles that define appropriate action in all situations. Following these categorical imperatives represents a moral duty for all humans. To define a categorical imperative, a person should ask whether the behavior in question is something that he or she would like to see universally implemented. In other words, a person should act in a way that he or she wants all others to act. Note that in many ways Kant's thinking parallels what we might call the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

A mass media researcher, for example, might develop a categorical imperative about deception. Deception is something that a researcher does not want to see universally practiced by all; nor does the researcher wish to be deceived. Therefore, deception is something that should not be used in research, no matter what the benefits and no matter what the circumstances.

The teleological, or balancing, theory is best exemplified by what philosopher John Stuart Mill called **utilitarianism**. In this theory, the good that may come from an action is weighed against or balanced against the possible harm. The individual then acts in a way that maximizes good and minimizes harm. In other words, the ultimate test for determining the rightness of some behavior depends on the outcomes that result from this behavior. The end may justify the means. As will be noted, most Institutional Review Boards at colleges and universities endorse this principle when they examine research proposals for ethical compliance.

A mass media researcher who follows the utilitarian approach must balance the good that will come from a research project against its possible negative effects. In this situation, a researcher might decide it is appropriate to use deception in an experiment if the positive benefits of the knowledge obtained outweigh the possible harmful effects of deceiving the subjects. One difficulty with this approach is that it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to anticipate all of the harm that might ensue from a given research design. Note that a researcher might use a different course of action depending upon which ethical theory is used as a guide.

A CLOSER LOOK

Why Be Ethical?

It's the right thing to do.

The **relativism** approach argues that there is no absolute right or wrong way to behave. Instead, ethical decisions are determined by the culture within which a researcher is working. Indeed, behavior that is judged wrong in one culture may be judged ethical in another. One way ethical norms of a culture are established is through the creation of codes of behavior or good conduct that describe what most researchers in the field believe are desirable or undesirable behaviors. A researcher confronted with a particular ethical problem can refer to these codes for guidance.

These three theories help form the basis for the ethical principles discussed next.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

General ethical principles are difficult to construct in the research area. However, there are at least four relevant principles. First is the principle of **autonomy**, or self-determination, which has its roots in the categorical imperative. Denying autonomy is not something that a researcher wishes to see universally practiced. Basic to this concept is the demand that the researcher respects the rights, values, and decisions of other people. The reasons for a person's action should be respected and the actions not interfered with. This principle is exemplified by the use of informed consent in the research procedure.

A second ethical principle important to social science research is **nonmaleficence**. In short, it is wrong to intentionally inflict harm on another. A third ethical principle—**beneficence**—is usually considered in tandem with nonmaleficence. Beneficence stipulates a positive obligation to remove existing harms and to confer benefits on others. These two principles operate together, and often the researcher must weigh the harmful risks of research against its possible benefits (for example, increased knowledge or a refined theory). Note how the utilitarian theory relates to these principles.

A fourth ethical principle, the principle of **justice**, is related to both deontological and teleological theories of ethics. At its general level, this principle holds that people who are equal in relevant respects should be treated equally. In the research context, this principle should be applied when new programs or policies are being evaluated. The positive results of such research should be shared with all. It would be unethical, for example, to deny the benefit of a new teaching procedure to children because they were originally chosen to be in the control group rather than in the group that received the experimental procedure. Benefits should be shared with all who are qualified.

Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) offer the following summary of moral principles commonly advocated by researchers:

1. Provide the people being studied with free choice.
2. Protect their right to privacy.
3. Benefit them, not harm them.
4. Treat them with respect.

It is clear that mass media researchers must follow some set of rules to meet their ethical obligations to their subjects and respondents. Cook (1976), discussing the laboratory approach, offers one such code of behavior that represents norms in the field:

- Do not involve people in research without their knowledge or consent.
- Do not coerce people to participate.
- Do not withhold from the participant the true nature of the research.
- Do not actively lie to the participant about the nature of the research.
- Do not lead the participant to commit acts that diminish his or her self-respect.
- Do not violate the right to self-determination.
- Do not expose the participant to physical or mental stress.
- Do not invade the privacy of the participant.
- Do not withhold benefits from participants in control groups.
- Do not fail to treat research participants fairly and to show them consideration and respect.

A CLOSER LOOK

Are You Being Studied?

A 2008 study done by researchers at Northeastern University secretly tracked the cell phone use of 100,000 people to study their travel patterns. The study was done outside the United States with the cooperation of a private cell-phone company and was not approved by any ethics review panel. The people who were investigated were not given the opportunity to consent to the study.

The researchers did take steps to protect the privacy of those who were studied. They didn't know which individuals were being tracked, and all cell phone numbers were transformed into 26-digit alphanumeric codes. In addition, the researchers reported their findings in the aggregate; no single individual's travel patterns were disclosed. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the study could have been done in the United States given current ethical guidelines.

One of the issues raised by the study involves privacy. Studies that involve observing behavior in public places is generally considered acceptable as long as the individuals being studied are not identified. However, a person's phone records are usually considered private and secretly examining them risks a violation of personal privacy. Moreover, existing guidelines state that research participants must give their informed consent as part of the research protocol. Tracking someone's location by secretly monitoring his or her cell phone use seems to violate this principle. Finally, there is the question of confidentiality. Although the researchers took pains to disguise the identities of their subjects, if the date were to fall into the wrong hands, potential harm to individuals might result.

To answer these criticisms, the researchers relied on the utilitarian principle to justify their method. They argued that any potential harm that might have resulted from this study would be far outweighed by its potential benefits. They pointed out that knowledge of people's travel patterns would be useful to urban planners and transportation experts, and it might even help doctors fight the spread of a disease.

In sum, this example illustrates some of the ethical issues that can arise thanks to new technologies such as cell phones and the Internet. Nevertheless, researchers need to be aware that the traditional ethical principles still apply.

To this list we add:

- Always treat every respondent or subject with unconditional human regard. (That is, accept and respect a person for what he or she is, and do not criticize the person for what he or she is not.)

Do academic and private sector researchers hold different values or view these core ethical principles differently? Chew (2000) surveyed both groups and found that both valued confidentiality equally while academic researchers placed a higher value on integrity and beneficence. Private sector researchers were more sensitive to conflict-of-interest issues.

SPECIFIC ETHICAL PROBLEMS

The following subsections discuss some of the common areas where mass media researchers might encounter ethical dilemmas.

Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent

An individual is entitled to decline to participate in any research project or to terminate participation at any time. Participation in an experiment, survey, or focus group is always voluntary, and any form of coercion is unacceptable. Researchers who are in a position of authority over subjects (as when a teacher/researcher hands questionnaires to university students) should be especially sensitive to implied coercion: Even though the researcher might tell the class that failure to participate will not affect grades, many students may not believe this. In such a situation, it is better to keep the questionnaires anonymous and for the person in authority to be absent from the room while the survey is administered.

Voluntary participation is not a pressing ethical issue in mail and telephone surveys because respondents are free to hang up the phone or to throw away the questionnaire. Nonetheless, a researcher should not attempt to induce subjects to participate by misrepresenting the organization sponsoring the research or by exaggerating its purpose or importance. For example, telephone interviewers should not be instructed to identify themselves as representatives of the "Department of Information" to mislead people into thinking the survey is government-sponsored. Likewise, mail questionnaires should not be constructed to mimic census forms, tax returns, Social Security questionnaires, or other official government forms.

Closely related to voluntary participation is the notion of **informed consent**. For people to volunteer for a research project, they need to know enough about the project to make an intelligent choice. Researchers have the responsibility to inform potential subjects or respondents of all features of the project that can reasonably be expected to influence participation. Respondents should understand that an interview may take as long as 45 minutes, that a second interview is required, or that after completing a mail questionnaire they may be singled out for a telephone interview.

In an experiment, informed consent means that potential subjects must be warned of any possible discomfort or unpleasantness that might be involved. Subjects should be told if they are to receive or administer electric shocks, be subjected to unpleasant audio or visual stimuli, or undergo any procedure that might cause concern. Any unusual measurement techniques that may be used must be described. Researchers have an obligation to answer candidly and truthfully, as far as possible, all the participants' questions about the research.

Experiments that involve deception (as described in the next subsection) cause special problems about obtaining informed consent. If deception is absolutely necessary to conduct an experiment, is the experimenter obligated to inform subjects that they may be deceived during the upcoming experiment? Will such a disclosure affect participation in the experiment? Will it also affect the experimental results? Should the researcher compromise the research by telling all potential subjects that deception will be involved for some participants but not for others?

Another problem is deciding how much information about a project a researcher must disclose in seeking informed consent. Is it enough to explain that the experiment involves rating commercials, or is it necessary to add that the experiment is designed to test whether subjects with high IQs prefer different commercials than those with low IQs? Obviously, in some situations the researcher cannot reveal everything about the project for fear of contaminating the results, or in the case of proprietary information. For example, if the goal of the research is to examine the influence of peer pressure on commercial evaluations, alerting the subjects to this facet of the investigation might change their behavior in the experiment.

Problems might occur in research that examines the impact of mass media in nonliterate communities—for example, the research subjects might not comprehend what they were told regarding the proposed investigation. Even in literate societies, many people fail to understand the implications for confidentiality of the storage of survey data on disks. Moreover, an investigator might not have realized in advance that some subjects would find part of an experiment or survey emotionally disturbing.

In 2002, the American Psychological Association's (APA) Council of Representatives adopted a new ethics code that addresses a wide range of ethical issues of relevance to that discipline. Since mass communication researchers face many of the same ethical issues faced by psychologists, it seems useful to quote from that document several provisions concerning informed consent. Researchers should disclose:

1. The purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures
2. The subjects' right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun
3. The foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing
4. Reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate, such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects
5. Any prospective research benefits
6. Limits of confidentiality
7. Incentives for participation
8. Whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights

Examine the APA's Code of Conduct at *www.apa.org/ethics/code*.

Research findings provide some indication of what research participants should be told to ensure informed consent. Epstein, Suedefeld, and Silverstein (1973) found that subjects wanted a general description of the experiment and what was expected of them; they wanted to know whether danger was involved, how long the experiment would last, and the experiment's purpose. As for informed consent and survey participation, Sobal (1984) found wide variation among researchers about what to tell respondents in the survey introduction. Almost all introductions identified the research organization and the interviewer by name and described the research topic. Less frequently mentioned in introductions were the sponsor of the research and guarantees of confidentiality or anonymity. Few survey introductions mentioned the length of the survey or that participation was voluntary. Greenberg and Garramone (1989) reported the results of a survey of 201 mass media researchers that disclosed that 96% usually provided guaranteed confidentiality of results, 92% usually named the sponsoring organization, 66% usually told respondents that participation is voluntary, and 61% usually disclosed the length of the questionnaire.

Finally, one must consider the form of the consent to be obtained. Written consent is a requirement in certain government-sponsored research programs and may also be required by many university research review committees, as discussed later in this section. However, in several generally recognized situations, signed forms are regarded as impractical. These include telephone surveys, mail surveys, personal interviews, and cases in which the signed form itself might represent an occasion for breach of confidentiality. For example, a respondent who has been promised anonymity as an inducement to participate in a face-to-face interview might be suspicious if asked to sign a consent form after the interview. In these circumstances, the fact that the respondent agreed to participate is taken as implied consent. The special problems of gaining consent for online research are discussed shortly.

As a general rule, the greater the risks of potential harm to subjects, the greater the need to obtain a consent statement. Figure 3.1 is an example of a typical consent form.

Concealment and Deception

Concealment and deception are encountered most frequently in experimental research. **Concealment** is withholding certain

Figure 3.1 Example of a Typical Consent Form

The purpose of this research is to explore possible relationships between watching daytime TV talk shows and perceptions of social reality. You will be asked questions about your general TV viewing, your viewing of daytime talk shows and your attitudes about interpersonal relationships. This questionnaire will take about 20 minutes to complete. Please answer every question as accurately as possible. Participation is voluntary. Your grades will not be affected if you choose not to participate. Your participation will be anonymous. No discomfort, stress, or risks are anticipated.

I agree to participate in the research entitled "Talk Show Viewing and Social Reality" conducted by ____________________, in the Department of Mass Communication at the University of ____________________, (telephone number ____________________). I understand that this participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of this participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research record, or destroyed.

______________________________	______________________________
Signature of Researcher (date)	Signature of Participant (date)

Research at the University of ____________________ that involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to ____________________, (telephone number ______________, email address ____________________).

information from the subjects; **deception** is deliberately providing false information. Both practices raise ethical problems. The difficulty in obtaining consent has already been mentioned. A second problem derives from the general feeling that it is wrong for experimenters to lie to or otherwise deceive subjects.

Many critics argue that deception transforms a subject from a human being into a manipulated object and is therefore demeaning to the participant. Moreover, once subjects have been deceived, they are likely to expect to be deceived again in other research projects. At least two research studies seem to suggest that this concern is valid. Stricker and Messick (1967) reported finding a high incidence of suspicion among high school age subjects after they had been deceived. More recently, Jamison, Karlan, and Schechter (2008) found that subjects who were deceived in one experiment were less likely to participate in a second experiment. In addition, when compared to subjects who were not deceived those individuals who were deceived displayed different behaviors in the subsequent experiment.

On the other hand, some researchers argue that certain studies could not be conducted at all without the use of deception. They use the utilitarian approach to argue that the harm done to those who are deceived is outweighed by the benefits of the research to scientific knowledge. Indeed, Christensen (1988) suggests that it may be immoral to fail to investigate important areas that cannot be investigated without the use of deception. He also argues that much of the sentiment against deception in research exists because deception has been analyzed only from the viewpoint of abstract moral philosophy. The subjects who were "deceived" in many experiments did not perceive what was done to them as deception but viewed it as a necessary element in the research procedure. Christensen illustrates the relativistic approach when he suggests that any decision regarding the use of deception should take into account the context and aim of the deception. Research suggests that subjects are most disturbed when deception violates their privacy or increases their risk of harm. Obviously, deception is not a technique that should be used indiscriminately.

Kelman (1967) suggests that before the investigator settles on deception as an experimental tactic, three questions should be examined:

1. How significant is the proposed study?
2. Are alternative procedures available that would provide the same information?
3. How severe is the deception? (It is one thing to tell subjects that the experimentally constructed message they are reading was taken from the *New York Times;* it is another to falsely report that the test a subject has just completed was designed to measure latent suicidal tendencies.)

Another set of criteria is put forth by Elms (1982), who suggests five necessary and sufficient conditions under which deception can be considered ethically justified in social science research:

1. When there is no other feasible way to obtain the desired information
2. When the likely benefits substantially outweigh the likely harm
3. When subjects are given the option to withdraw at any time without penalty
4. When any physical or psychological harm to subjects is temporary
5. When subjects are debriefed about all substantial deception and the research procedures are made available for public review

A CLOSER LOOK

Research Ethics and Facebook

The social networking site Facebook is extremely popular among college students. More than 200 million people are active members of the site, and it regularly shows up among the top 10 most-visited destinations on the Internet. Facebook has also become a gold mine of information for researchers. Social scientists at several universities are using Facebook data to examine such topics as self-esteem, popularity, and personal attraction. Not surprisingly, Facebook has generated a few new ethical issues as well.

To illustrate, researchers at Harvard University studied social relationships by secretly monitoring the Facebook profiles of an entire class of students at a U.S. college. The 1,700 students involved in the project did not know they were being studied, nor had they given their permission to the Harvard research team. The researchers promised that they will take steps to insure the privacy of all the participants. Does such a study violate accepted ethical standards?

Federal human subjects' guidelines were mainly written for an era before Facebook existed and are open to interpretation. As a result, many universities have established their own, sometimes conflicting, policies. The Institutional Review Board at Indiana University, for example, will not approve research using data from social networking sites without the site's approval or the consent of those being studied. Other universities seem to rely on the traditional principle that no consent is needed if a researcher is observing public behavior.

But is the information on Facebook public or private? One side of this argument maintains that Facebook members have no expectations of privacy when it comes to posting information on their pages. Indeed, it appears that the prime motivation of Facebook members is to share the information. If users choose not to use the privacy safeguards provided by the site, what they post is fair game.

On the other hand, is the assumption of no privacy expectations accurate? A survey of Facebook members found that most expected that their profiles would be viewed mainly by a small circle of friends—not the world in general. Sharing information in this limited context is not the same as posting something for all to see. Further, even if Facebook members intended that the information be made public, it does not necessarily mean that they consented to the information being aggregated, coded, analyzed, and distributed. Once the data were published, even if presented only in the aggregate form, it might be possible for someone to identify the subjects involved in the research. (Indeed, once data from the Harvard University study were released, researchers quickly identified both the college where the research was conducted and the class that was examined.)

Once again, the Internet is forcing researchers to re-examine their traditional assumptions about the ethical dimensions of their research.

Together the suggestions of Kelman and Elms offer researchers good advice for the planning stages of investigations.

When an experiment is concluded, especially one involving concealment or deception, it is the responsibility of the investigator to debrief subjects. **Debriefing** means that after the experiment is over the investigator thoroughly describes the purpose of the research, explains the use of deception (if it occurred), and encourages the subject to ask questions about the research. Debriefing should be thorough enough to remove any lasting effects that might have been created by the experimental manipulation or by any other aspect of the experiment. Subjects' questions should be answered and the potential value of the experiment stressed. How common is debriefing among mass media researchers? In the survey cited in Greenberg and Garramone (1989), 71% of the researchers reported they usually debrief subjects, 19% debrief sometimes, and 10% rarely or never debrief subjects. Although it is an ethical requirement of most experiments, the practice of debriefing has yet to be embraced by all investigators.

The APA's 2002 code contains the following provisions concerning deception:

> **a.** Psychologists do not conduct a study involving deception unless they have determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study's significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and that effective nondeceptive alternative procedures are not feasible.
>
> **b.** Psychologists do not deceive prospective participants about research that is reasonably expected to cause physical pain or severe emotional distress.
>
> **c.** Psychologists explain any deception that is an integral feature of the design and conduct of an experiment to participants as early as is feasible, preferably at the conclusion of their participation, but no later than at the conclusion of the data collection, and permit participants to withdraw their data.

The American Sociological Association's guidelines for research contain similar language:

- Sociologists do not use deceptive techniques unless (1) they have determined that their use will not be harmful to research participants; justified by the study's prospective scientific, educational, or applied value; and that equally effective alternative procedures that do not use deception are not feasible, and (2) unless they have obtained the approval of institutional review boards.
- Sociologists never deceive research participants about significant aspects of the research that would affect their willingness to participate, such as physical risks, discomfort, or unpleasant emotional experiences.
- When deception is an integral feature of the design and conduct of research, sociologists attempt to correct any misconception that research participants may have no later than at the conclusion of the research.

No data are available on how often deception is used in mass media research. However, some information is available from other fields. In a study of 23 years of articles published in a leading psychology journal, Sieber (1995) found that 66% of all studies published in 1969 used deception, compared to 47% in 1992. A recent survey of the literature (Hertwig & Ortman, 2008) found that around half of all the studies in social psychology used some form of deception.

Protection of Privacy

The problem of protecting the privacy of participants arises more often in field observation and survey research than in laboratory studies. In field studies, observers may study people in public places without their knowledge (for example, individuals watching TV at an airport lounge). The more public the place, the less a person has an expectation of privacy and the fewer ethical problems are encountered. However, there are some public situations that present ethical concerns.

Is it ethical, for example, for a researcher to pretend to browse in a video rental store when in fact the researcher is observing who rents pornographic videos? What about eavesdropping on people's dinner conversations to determine how often news topics are discussed? To minimize ethical problems, a researcher should violate privacy only to the minimum degree needed to gather the data.

When they take a survey, respondents have a right to know whether their privacy will be maintained and who will have access to the information they provide. There are two ways to guarantee privacy: by assuring anonymity and by assuring confidentiality. A promise of **anonymity** is a guarantee that a given respondent cannot possibly be linked to any particular response. In many research projects, anonymity is an advantage because it encourages respondents to be honest and candid in their answers. Strictly speaking, personal and telephone interviews cannot be anonymous because the researcher can link a given questionnaire to a specific person, household, or telephone number. In such instances, the researcher should promise **confidentiality**; that is, respondents should be assured that even though they can be identified as individuals, their names will never be publicly associated with the information they provide. A researcher should never use *anonymous* in a way that is or seems to be synonymous with *confidential*.

Additionally, respondents should be told who *will* have access to the information they provide. The researcher's responsibility for assuring confidentiality does not end once the data have been analyzed and the study concluded. Questionnaires that identify people by name should not be stored in public places, nor should other researchers be given permission to examine confidential data unless all identifying marks have been obliterated. The APA's statement does not contain much guidance on issues of privacy and confidentiality. It does say that researchers should inform subjects if they are planning to share or use data that are personally identifiable. The American Sociological Association's guidelines are more detailed. In part they include the following provisions:

- Sociologists take reasonable precautions to protect the confidentiality rights of research participants, students, employees, clients, or others.
- Confidential information provided by research participants, students, employees, clients, or others is treated as such by sociologists even if there is no legal protection or privilege to do so. Sociologists have an obligation to protect confidential information and not allow information gained in confidence from being used in ways that would unfairly compromise research participants, students, employees, clients, or others.
- Sociologists may confront unanticipated circumstances when they become aware of information that is clearly health- or life-threatening to research participants, students, employees, clients, or others. In these cases, sociologists balance the importance of guarantees of confidentiality with other principles in this Code of Ethics, standards of conduct, and applicable law.
- Confidentiality is not required with respect to observations in public places, activities conducted in public, or other settings where no rules of privacy are provided by law or custom. Similarly, confidentiality is not required in the case of information available from public records.

Federal Regulations Concerning Research

In 1971, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) drafted rules for obtaining informed consent from research participants, which included full documentation of informed consent procedures. In addition, the government set up a system of **institutional review boards** (IRBs) to safeguard the rights of human subjects. In 2008, there were more than 800 IRBs at medical schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, and other institutions.

IRBs are a continuing source of irritation for many social science researchers and some seemingly strange IRB decisions have been well publicized. For example, one researcher studying pre-literate societies was required by the IRB to have respondents read and sign a consent form before being interviewed. Another IRB tried to block an English professor's essay that used students' personal accounts of encountering violence because the students might be stressed if they read the essay. (See American Association of University Professors, 2006, Research on Human Subjects: Academic Freedom and the Institutional Review Board, available at *www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/A/humansubs.htm*, for other examples.)

At most universities, IRBs have become part of the permanent bureaucracy. They hold regular meetings and have developed standardized forms that must accompany research proposals that involve human subjects or respondents. For a description of how a typical IRB operates, consult *www.nova.edu/irb/*.

In 1981, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS, successor to HEW) softened its regulations concerning social science research. The department's *Policy for the Protection of Human Research Subjects* exempts studies that use existing public data; research in educational settings about new instructional techniques; research involving the use of anonymous education tests; and survey, interview, and observational research in public places, provided the subjects are not identified and sensitive information is not collected. Signed consent forms are deemed unnecessary if the research presents only a minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is required outside the research context. This means that signed consent forms are no longer necessary in the interview situation because a person does not usually seek written consent before asking a question.

The Office for Human Research Protections has created a series of intricate decision charts to help researchers decide if their research needs IRB approval. The 11 charts answer questions related to the following issues:

- Whether an activity is research that must be reviewed by an IRB
- Whether the review may be performed by expedited procedures
- Whether informed consent or its documentation may be waived

The charts may be found at *www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/decisioncharts.htm*.

Although the new guidelines apparently exempt most nonexperimental social science research from federal regulation, IRBs at some institutions still review all research proposals that involve human subjects, and some IRBs still follow the old HEW standards. In fact, some IRB regulations are even more stringent than the federal guidelines. As a practical matter, a researcher should always build a little more time into the research schedule to accommodate IRB procedures.

As mass communication researchers investigate more sensitive topics, such as pornography on the Internet, coverage of terrorism, and "hate speech," their research will be increasingly scrutinized by IRBs. This situation has caused some controversy in the academic community, particularly among journalists who claim IRB review is a potential violation of the First Amendment. The Summer 2002 issue of the *Journalism and*

Mass Communication Educator includes a symposium that explores this and related issues in detail.

You can read the online version of the HHS's Office for Human Research Protections guidelines at *www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm*.

Ethics in Data Analysis and Reporting

Researchers are responsible for maintaining professional standards in analyzing and reporting their data. The ethical guidelines in this area are less controversial and more clear-cut. In 2000, the U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy identified three areas of research misconduct: fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism. One cardinal rule is that researchers have a moral and ethical obligation to refrain from tampering with data: Questionnaire responses and experimental observations may not be fabricated, altered, or discarded. Similarly, researchers are expected to exercise reasonable care in processing the data to guard against needless errors that might affect the results.

Another universal ethical principle is that authors should not plagiarize. The work of someone else should not be reproduced without giving proper credit to the original author. Somewhat related, only those individuals who contribute significantly to a research project should be given authorship credit. This last statement addresses the problem of piggybacking, when a subordinate is pressured by someone in authority to include the superior's name on a manuscript even though the superior had little input into the finished product. The definition of a "significant contribution" might be fuzzy at times; generally, however, to be listed as an author, a person should play a major role in conceptualizing, analyzing, or writing the final document.

Another problem that sometimes occurs involves the order of authorship of an article or a report. If there are two or more researchers involved, who gets listed as first author ("top billing")? Ideally, all those involved should decide on the order of authorship at the beginning of a project, subject to later revision if changes in contribution should happen. Usually, the first author is the one who made the biggest contribution to the work. Finally, special problems are involved when university faculty do research with students. (This topic is discussed later in this chapter.)

Researchers should never conceal information that might influence the interpretation of their findings. For example, if two weeks elapsed between the testing of an experimental group and the testing of a control group, the delay should be reported so that other researchers can discount the effects of history and maturation on the results. Every research report should contain a full and complete description of method, particularly any departure from standard procedures.

Since science is a public activity, researchers have an ethical obligation to share their findings and methods with other researchers. All questionnaires, experimental materials, measurement instruments, instructions to subjects, and other relevant items should be made available to those who wish to examine them.

Finally, all investigators are under an ethical obligation to draw conclusions from their data that are consistent with those data. Interpretations should not be stretched or distorted to fit a personal point of view or a favorite theory, or to gain or maintain a client's favor. Nor should researchers attribute greater significance or credibility to their data than is justified. For example, when analyzing correlation coefficients obtained from a large sample, a researcher could achieve statistical significance with an r of only, for example, 0.10. It would be perfectly acceptable to report a statistically significant result in this case, but the investigator should also mention that the predictive utility of the

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Ethics Violations Have Consequences

In early 2009, the Executive Council of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) censured a Johns Hopkins professor for violating the association's ethics policy. The professor, Gilbert Burnham, had published a controversial study in the British medical journal the *Lancet*, in which he estimated the number of Iraqi civilian deaths resulting from the U.S. invasion as nearly 650,000, a figure that was several times higher than other estimates.

AAPOR began investigating the study after one of its members questioned the accuracy of Burnham's estimate. During its eight-month investigation, AAPOR asked Burnham for a description of the methodology that he used in the study. Burnham refused to provide all of the information that AAPOR requested.

In its censure statement, AAPOR said that Burnham's refusal to fully cooperate with the probe "violates the fundamental standards of science, seriously undermines open public debate on critical issues and undermines the credibility of all survey and public opinion research."

The AAPOR statement makes no judgment about the accuracy of Burnham's count or about his methodology. The censure was based solely on his refusal to disclose all of the details of his research.

Johns Hopkins officials responded to the AAPOR censure by noting that neither Burnham nor his department are members of AAPOR. Nonetheless, the university announced it was conducting its own investigation into Burnham's methods.

correlation is not large and, specifically, that it explains only 1% of the total variation. In short, researchers should report their results with candor and honesty.

Ethics in the Publication Process

Publishing the results of research in scholarly journals is an important part of the process of scientific inquiry. Science is a public activity, and publication is the most efficient way to share research knowledge. In addition, success in the academic profession is often tied to a successful publication record. Consequently, certain ethical guidelines are usually followed with regard to publication procedures. From the perspective of the researcher seeking to submit an article for publication, the first ethical guideline comes into play when the article is ready to be sent for review. The researcher should submit the proposed article to only one journal at a time because simultaneous submission to several sources is inefficient and wasteful. When an article is submitted for review to an academic journal, it is usually sent to two, three, or more reviewers for evaluation. Simultaneous submission means that several sets of referees spend their time pointing out the same problems and difficulties that could have been reported by a single set. The duplication of effort is unnecessary and might delay consideration of other articles waiting for review.

A related ethical problem concerns attempts to publish nearly identical or highly similar articles based on the same data set. For example, suppose a researcher has data on the communication patterns in a large organization. The investigator writes one article emphasizing the communication angle for a communication journal and a second article with a management slant for a business journal. Both articles draw on the same database and contain comparable results. Is this practice ethical? This is not an easy question to answer. Some journal editors apparently do not approve of writing multiple papers from the same data; others suggest that this practice is acceptable, provided submissions are made to journals that do not have overlapping audiences. In addition, there is the sticky question of how different one manuscript has to be from another to be considered a separate entity.

On the other hand, journal editors and reviewers have ethical obligations to those who submit manuscripts for evaluation. Editors and reviewers should not let the decision process take an inordinate amount of time; a prompt and timely decision is owed to all contributors. (Most editors of mass communication journals try to notify contributors of their decision within three months.) Reviewers should try to provide positive and helpful reviews; they should not do "hatchet jobs" on articles submitted to them. Moreover, reviewers should not unjustly squelch manuscripts that argue against one of their pet ideas, or contradict or challenge some of their own research. Each contributor to a journal should receive an objective and impartial review. Neither should reviewers quibble needlessly over minor points in an article or demand unreasonable changes. Reviewers also owe contributors consistency. Authors find it frustrating to revise their manuscripts according to a reviewer's wishes only to find that, on a second reading, the reviewer has a change of mind and prefers the original version.

Ryan and Martinson (1999) surveyed nearly 100 scholars whose articles had appeared in two mass communication journals during the mid-1990s. They found that the three biggest complaints of these authors were (1) editors who didn't reach a decision about a manuscript in a reasonable amount of time, (2) editors who blamed delays on reviewers, and (3) reviewers who did not have expertise in the area represented by the manuscript.

Ethical Problems of Student-Faculty Research

Schiff and Ryan (1996) list several ethical dilemmas that can occur in a college setting, including using undergraduate classes for research and claiming joint authorship of articles based on student theses and dissertations. With regard to the first problem, they found that about 36% of a sample of 138 faculty members who had recently chaired a thesis or dissertation committee reported that using a research class to collect data for a thesis or dissertation was unethical and that 65% thought it was unethical to require undergraduate classes to participate in thesis or dissertation research. (Note that Schiff and Ryan were investigating the ethics involved in using undergraduates for dissertation or thesis research—not research projects conducted by faculty members. Presumably, however, the numbers should be similar.)

Schiff and Ryan found uniform ethical norms concerning authorship of articles stemming from theses and dissertations. About 86% of the respondents stated that requiring students to list a professor as coauthor on any article stemming from the thesis or dissertation as a condition for directing the project was unethical.

The APA's ethics committee provides some guidelines with regard to the joint authorship of articles based on a dissertation or thesis:

- The dissertation adviser may receive only second authorship.
- Secondary authorship for the adviser may be considered obligatory if the adviser supplies the database, designates variables, or makes important interpretive contributions.

- If the adviser suggests the general topic, is significantly involved in the design or instrumentation of the project, or substantially contributes to the writing, then the student may offer the adviser second authorship as a courtesy.
- If the adviser offered only financial aid, facilities, and periodic critiques, then secondary authorship is inappropriate.

However, some researchers argue that a dissertation should comprise original and independent work and that involvement by the researcher sufficient to merit co-authorship may be too much involvement (Audi, 1990).

The Rights of Students as Research Participants

College students provide much of the data in social science research. In psychology, for example, more than 70% of studies use students (Korn, 1988). In fact, it is the rare liberal arts major who has not participated in (or had a request to participate in) social science research. The ethical dimensions of this situation have not been overlooked. Korn (1988) suggests a "bill of rights" for students who agree to be research subjects:

- Participants should know the general purpose of the study and what they will be expected to do. Beyond this, they should be told everything a reasonable person would want to know in order to participate.
- Participants have the right to withdraw from a study at any time after beginning participation in the research.
- Participants should expect to receive benefits that outweigh the costs or risks involved. To achieve the educational benefit, participants have the right to ask questions and to receive clear, honest answers. If they don't receive what was promised, they have the right to remove their data from the study.
- Participants have the right to expect that anything done or said during their participation in a study will remain anonymous or confidential, unless they specifically agree to give up this right.
- Participants have the right to decline to participate in any study and may not be coerced into research. When learning about research is a course requirement, an equivalent alternative to participation should be available.
- Participants have the right to know when they have been deceived in a study and why the deception was used. If the deception seems unreasonable, participants have the right to withhold their data.
- When any of these rights is violated or participants have objections about a study, they have the right and responsibility to inform the appropriate university officials.

A Professional Code of Ethics

Formalized codes of ethics have yet to be developed by all professional associations involved in mass media research. In 2008, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) proposed a Code of Ethics that included a section on ethics in research that was organized around four core values: accountability, fidelity and truth telling, justice, and caring. (AEJMC, 2008). The proposed ethical guidelines included the following:

- We never plagiarize or take credit for another individual's work.
- We inform subjects of our status as researchers.
- AEJMC members protect research participants [and] treat all research participants with respect fairness and integrity . . . We ensure that participants provide informed consent and that participation in research is not coerced.

ETHICS AND ONLINE RESEARCH

Although much of the research conducted online may not raise questions about ethics, both quantitative and qualitative researchers should be aware that the growing use of the Internet as a research medium has outpaced the efforts of researchers to establish generally accepted ethical principles regarding online research. One problem is that online research can involve a wide variety of settings, including websites, email, chat rooms, instant messages, newsgroups, and Multiple User Dialogues (MUDs), that are not directly addressed in existing ethical guidelines. With that in mind, the following recommendations are general suggestions to guide researchers faced with particular issues in online research.

As a starting point, it is possible to distinguish at least two different types of online research. The first can be labeled *passive research*, where researchers study the content of websites, chat rooms, message boards, or blogs. The researchers may or may not identify themselves to the participants. Much qualitative research and some quantitative content analyses would fall into this area. An example of this might be a researcher who conducts a content analysis of the messages posted on the website of a particular TV show or the content contained in a sample of blogs.

The ethical problem that might arise in this situation is if the researcher needs consent to analyze and to quote the online material. Obviously, if the site is intended to reach the general public, such as *CNN.com*, the material may be freely analyzed and quoted to the degree necessary in the research without consent. This situation would be analogous to analyzing the content of a newspaper or a TV newscast.

Let's take a more concrete example. What about analyzing the posts in an online forum such as those run by the Poynter Institute? One such forum concerns diversity issues. Is it ethical for a researcher to publish quotes from this forum without the consent of the participants? In this situation, the researcher needs to ask: (1) Is the forum open to all? In other words, is it a public or private space? (2) Does it require registration or a password to post? (3) Does the site have a policy against quoting from its content? (4) Do participants have an expectation of privacy concerning their posts?

In this particular example, the forum requires registration and a password to enter, suggesting that it is more of a private than public space and that participants have some expectation of privacy. Although the site has no explicit policy against direct quotes, publishing posts without consent would appear to be ethically questionable. The Poynter Institute arrangement is typical of most current online forums—registration and passwords are generally required. Some newsgroups, however, such as the one devoted to discussions of Microsoft's Windows Media Player, contain posts that may be read by anybody without registration. A warning statement on the site cautions: "Please keep in mind that our communities are public spaces, so don't post anything that you don't want the world to see." Analyzing this kind of forum would seem to pose little ethical risk.

If a site requires a password or has guidelines that indicate that the members have some expectation of privacy, then a researcher should obtain the consent of the participants. However, the researcher should be aware that posting a message such as "May I record your comments for research purposes?" on a message board may not be met with a warm response. In fact, in many live chat rooms, such a request would be enough to get the researcher kicked out. In addition, if permission is granted, the researcher needs to consider if the act of recording (and making permanent) comments from the group poses any kind of risk for the participants.

Finally, there is the problem of disguising the identities of participants. Naming the group or forum from which the quotes were taken might enable some people to identify an individual. Further, if a researcher publishes long verbatim quotes, it is possible that a search engine might be able to trace the quotes back to the person who made them. A researcher who promises confidentiality to his or her participants might employ the following safeguards:

- Do not name the group.
- Paraphrase long quotes.
- Disguise some information, such as institutional or organizational names.
- Omit details that might be harmful to individual participants.

The second type of research can be thought of as *active research*, where a researcher attempts to gather online information through online surveys, focus groups, or types of experiments. This situation poses even more ethical problems.

First, federal human-subjects rules require that researchers document informed consent from research participants. In addition, the rules also state that this documentation must be a "written form" signed by the subject. This is virtually impossible to do online. Fortunately, this requirement can be waived for research with adults that poses only minimal risks. In this case, the researcher prepares an online version of a consent form, and consent is given online by clicking a button that indicates that respondents have read and understood the form. The following demonstrate a couple of examples to indicate consent:

> Please click the appropriate option below. By clicking on the "Yes" option, you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old and are giving your informed consent to be a participant in this study.
>
> - Yes, I am giving my consent. Take me to the survey
> - No, I do not wish to participate
>
> I voluntarily agree to participate in this project. I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time and that any information obtained from me during the course of my participation will remain confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. I also affirm that I am at least 18 years old.
>
> - I agree
> - I do not wish to continue

In some situations, it is difficult for a researcher to determine if the participant truly understands the consent form. Some experts (Kraut et al., 2004) recommend that researchers divide the consent form into logical segments and require participants to check a "click to accept" box for each section. On the other hand, if the research project involves more than minimal risk or is to be done among those under 18, consent should still be obtained by a signature on paper (from the participants or from parents in the case of research involving minors). These consent forms can be sent to the researcher by paper mail or by fax. In addition, an assent form from minors may be required. Of course, respondents may lie about their age, and children can pretend to be their parents. To help guard against this, an investigator might require subjects to provide information that is usually available only to adults (such as a credit card number). If the risk to subjects is high, the researcher might want to consider using more traditional means to collect data.

A second difficulty is debriefing. In a traditional experimental setting, the researcher provides subjects with a full explanation of the research after the subjects have finished

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Ethics and Broadcast Research

A few years ago, the senior author of this text was contacted by a radio station general manager (GM) who stated, "My morning show host is a pain in the neck and I want to fire him. I'd like you to conduct a telephone study to back up my opinions." What would you say to the GM? Would you conduct the study?

the experiment. In addition, if deception was involved, the investigator must explain the deception and why it was necessary. In the online setting, about the best a researcher can do is to provide a link to a debriefing page, but there is no guarantee that the subject will read it or understand it. In addition, what happens if subjects quit before they finish the experiment? Will they also be sent to a debriefing page?

At the technical level, as Hamilton (1999) points out, the problem of guaranteeing confidentiality becomes more complicated because some web research projects might involve a website run by some individual or organization other than the researcher. Methods for making sure that everyone who has access to the data maintains confidentiality must be worked out. Other technical issues include whether the data are collected only when the research is finished or after every question. Do respondents have the ability to delete all of their data if they change their mind halfway through the research?

Gift certificates, a chance to win an iPod, cash payments, and the like, are common incentives that are frequently used to encourage participation in the study. This creates another problem for online researchers since some means of identification must be used to contact those who receive rewards. To safeguard confidentiality, Barchard and Williams (2008) recommend that such contact information be kept in a separate location from the data collected from the main study, such as in a separate database. Research in a virtual world, such as Second Life, is also subject to ethical considerations. The site's policy requires researchers to identify themselves and get permission from participants before reporting their comments.

Hamilton (1999) suggests an appropriate set of guidelines for online research. He recommends that at a minimum an online researcher should provide the following:

- A way to contact the researcher
- A way to obtain informed consent
- Full disclosure of any risks to confidentiality
- A debriefing page
- A way for participants to obtain the results of the study

SUMMARY

Ethical considerations in conducting research should not be overlooked. Nearly every research study could affect subjects in some way, either psychologically or physically. Researchers who deal with human subjects must ensure that all precautions are taken to avoid any potential harm to subjects. This includes carefully planning a study and debriefing subjects upon completion of a project. Online research raises special problems concerning ethics.

Key Terms

Anonymity
Autonomy
Beneficence
Categorical imperative
Concealment
Confidentiality
Deception
Debriefing
Deontological theories
Ethics
Informed consent
Institutional Review Boards
Justice
Nonmaleficence
Relativism
Relativistic theories
Teleological theories
Utilitarianism
Voluntary participation

Using the Internet

The Internet is full of articles and discussions of research ethics. For examples and extended discussions of various ethical theories use search terms such as "deontological theories," "teleological theories," or "consequential theories."

Search for codes of conduct in other areas, such as medicine or anthropology. Do these codes have anything in common? What would you do if your study were condemned as unethical?

Questions and Problems for Further Investigation

1. Using the five examples in the first section of this chapter, suggest alternative ways of conducting each study that would be ethically acceptable.
2. In your opinion, what types of media research are unfair to respondents? What types of studies encroach on the guidelines discussed in this chapter?
3. In your opinion, is it wrong for researchers to give respondents the impression that they are being recruited for a particular study when the researchers actually have another purpose in mind? What are the limits to this behavior?
4. What are some other problems that might arise when doing online research? For example, do hackers pose a danger?

For additional resources go to *www.wimmerdominick.com* and *www.cengage.com/masscomm/wimmer/mediaresearch9e*.

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