

## CHAPTER 3

# Ethics in Research

### Historical Background

### Ethical Principles

*Protecting Research Subjects*  
Avoid Harming Research Subjects  
Obtain Informed Consent  
Avoid Deception in Research, Except in Limited Circumstances

Maintain Privacy and Confidentiality  
*Maintaining Honesty and Openness*  
*Achieving Valid Results*  
*Encouraging Appropriate Application*

### Conclusion

Imagine this: One spring morning as you are drinking coffee and reading the newspaper, you notice a small ad for a psychology experiment at the local university.

**WE WILL PAY YOU \$45 FOR ONE HOUR OF YOUR TIME**

*Persons Needed for a Study of Memory*

“Earn money and learn about yourself,” it continues. Feeling a bit bored, you call and schedule an evening visit to the lab.

You are about to enter one of the most ethically controversial experiments in the history of social science.

You arrive at the assigned room at the university and are immediately impressed by the elegance of the building and the professional appearance of the personnel. In the waiting room, you see a man dressed in a lab technician’s coat talking to another visitor, a middle-aged fellow dressed in casual attire. The man in the lab coat turns, introduces himself, and explains that, as a psychologist, he is interested in whether people learn better when they

are punished for making mistakes. He quickly convinces you that this is an important question; he then explains that his experiment on punishment and learning will discover the answer. Then he announces,

“I’m going to ask one of you to be the teacher here tonight and the other one to be the learner.”

The Experimenter [as we’ll refer to him from now on] says he will write either “Teacher” or “Learner” on small identical slips of paper and then asks both of you to draw one. Yours says “Teacher.”

The Experimenter now says, in a matter-of-fact way,

“All right. Now the first thing we’ll have to do is to set the Learner up so that he can get some type of punishment.”

He leads you both behind a curtain, sits the Learner in the chair, straps down both of his arms, and attaches an electric wire to his left wrist (Exhibit 3.1). The wire is connected to a console with 30 switches and a large dial, on the other side of the curtain. When you ask what the wire is for, the Experimenter demonstrates. He asks you to take hold of the end of

### EXHIBIT 3.1 Learner Strapped in Chair With Electrodes



Source: From the film *Obedience* © 1968 by Stanley Milgram, © Renewed 1993 by Alexandra Milgram, and distributed by Penn State, Media Sales.

the wire, walks back to the control console, and flips several switches. You hear a clicking noise, see the dial move, and then feel an electric shock in your hand. When the experimenter flips the next switch, the shock increases.

“Ouch!” you say. “So that’s the punishment. Couldn’t it cause injury?” The Experimenter explains that the machine is calibrated so that it will not cause permanent injury but admits that when turned up all the way, it is very, very painful.

Now you walk back to the other side of the room (so that the Learner is behind the curtain) and sit before the console (Exhibit 3.2). The experimental procedure has four simple steps:

1. You read aloud a series of word pairs, like “blue box,” “nice day,” “wild duck,” etc.
2. You read one of the first words from those pairs and a set of four words, one of which is the original paired word. For example, you might say, “Blue: sky-ink-box-lamp.”
3. The Learner states the word that he thinks was paired with the first word you read (“blue”). If he gives a correct response, you compliment him and move on to the next word. If he makes a mistake, you flip a switch on the console. This causes the Learner to feel a shock on his wrist.
4. After each mistake, you are to flip the next switch on the console, progressing from left to right. You note that a label corresponds to every 5th mark on the dial, with the 1st mark labeled “slight shock,” the 5th mark labeled “moderate shock,” the 10th “strong shock,” and so on through “very strong shock,” “intense shock,” “extreme intensity shock,” and “danger: severe shock.”

### EXHIBIT 3.2 Milgram’s “Shock Generator”



Source: From the film *Obedience* © 1968 by Stanley Milgram, © Renewed 1993 by Alexandra Milgram, and distributed by Penn State, Media Sales.

You begin. The Learner at first gives some correct answers, but then he makes a few errors. Soon you are beyond the 5th mark (“slight shock”) and are moving in the direction of more and more severe shocks. As you turn the dial, the Learner’s reactions increase in intensity: from a grunt at the 15th mark (“strong shock”) to painful groans at higher levels, to anguished cries of “Get me out of here!” at the “extreme intensity shock” levels, to a deathly silence at the highest level. When you protest at administering the stronger shocks, the Experimenter tells you, “The experiment requires that you continue.” Occasionally he says, “It is absolutely essential that you continue.”

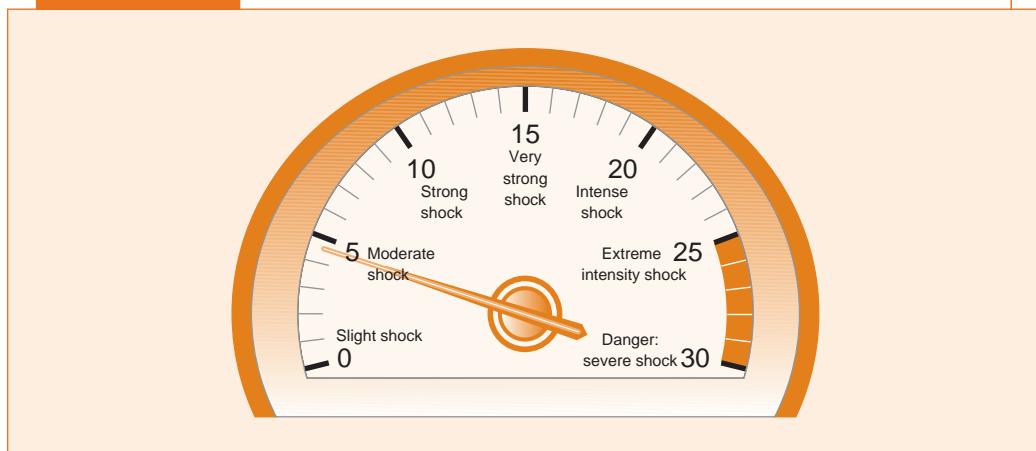
This is a simplified version of the famous “obedience” experiments by Stanley Milgram (1963), begun at Yale University in 1960. Outside the laboratory, Milgram surveyed Yale undergraduates and asked them to indicate at what level they would terminate their “shocks” if they were in the study. Please mark on the console below the most severe shock that you would agree to give the Learner (Exhibit 3.3).

The average (mean) maximum shock level predicted by the Yale undergraduates was 9.35, corresponding to a “strong” shock. Only one student predicted that he would provide a stimulus above that level, at the “very strong” level. Responses were similar from nonstudent groups.

But the actual average level of shock administered by the 40 adults who volunteered for the experiment was 24.53—higher than “extreme intensity shock” and just short of “danger: severe shock.” Twenty-five of Milgram’s original 40 subjects complied entirely with the experimenter’s demands, going all the way to the top of the scale (labeled simply as “XXX”). Judging from the subjects’ visibly high stress, and from their subsequent reports, they believed that the Learner was receiving physically painful shocks.

We introduce the Milgram experiment not to discuss obedience to authority but instead to introduce research ethics. We refer to Milgram’s obedience studies throughout this chapter, since they ultimately had as profound an influence on scientists’ thinking about ethics as on how we understand obedience to authority.

**EXHIBIT 3.3** Shock Meter



Throughout this book, we discuss ethical problems common to various research methods; in this particular chapter, we present in more detail some of the general ethical principles that professional social scientists use in monitoring their work.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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Formal procedures for the protection of participants in research grew out of some widely publicized abuses. A defining event occurred in 1946, when the **Nuremberg war crime trials** exposed horrific medical experiments conducted during World War II by Nazi doctors in the name of “science.” During the 1950s and 1960s, American military personnel and Pacific Islanders were sometimes unknowingly exposed to radiation during atomic bomb tests. And in the 1970s, Americans were shocked to learn that researchers funded by the U.S. Public Health Service had, for decades, studied 399 low-income African American men diagnosed with syphilis in the 1930s to follow the “natural” course of the illness (Exhibit 3.4). In the **Tuskegee syphilis study**, many participants were not informed of their illness and were denied treatment until 1972, even though a cure (penicillin) was developed in the 1950s (Jones, 1993).

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***Nuremberg war crime trials:*** Trials held in Nuremberg, Germany, in the years following World War II, in which the former leaders of Nazi Germany were charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity; frequently considered the first trials for people accused of genocide

***Tuskegee syphilis study:*** Research study conducted by a branch of the U.S. government, lasting for roughly 50 years (ending in the 1970s), in which a sample of African American men diagnosed with syphilis were deliberately left untreated, without their knowledge, to learn about the lifetime course of the disease

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Such egregious violations of human rights resulted, in the United States, in the creation of a National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The Commission’s 1979 **Belmont Report** (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979) established three basic ethical principles for the protection of human subjects (Exhibit 3.5):

1. **Respect for persons**—Treating persons as autonomous agents and protecting those with diminished autonomy
2. **Beneficence**—Minimizing possible harms and maximizing benefits
3. **Justice**—Distributing benefits and risks of research fairly

**EXHIBIT 3.4** Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment


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**Belmont Report:** Report in 1979 of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research stipulating three basic ethical principles for the protection of human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice

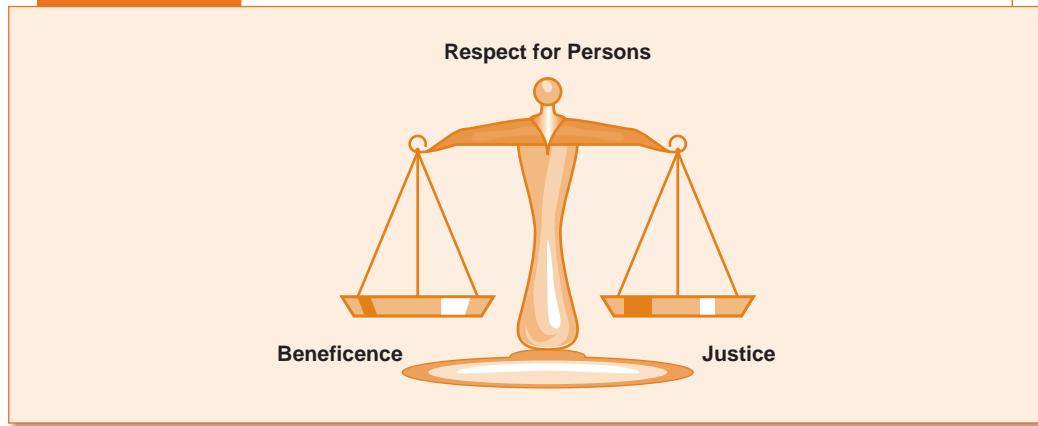
**Beneficence:** Minimizing possible harms and maximizing benefits

**Justice:** As used in human research ethics discussions, distributing benefits and risks of research fairly

**Respect for persons:** In human subjects ethics discussions, treating persons as autonomous agents and protecting those with diminished autonomy

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The Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration then translated these principles into specific regulations, which were adopted in 1991 as the **Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects**. This policy has shaped the course of social science research ever since, and you will have to take it into account as you design your own research investigations. Some professional associations, such as the American Psychological Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Sociological Association, university review boards, and ethics committees in other

**EXHIBIT 3.5** *Belmont Report Principles*

organizations, set standards for the treatment of human subjects by their members, employees, and students; these standards are designed to comply with the federal policy.

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***Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects:*** Federal regulations codifying basic principles for conducting research on human subjects; used as the basis for professional organizations' guidelines

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Federal regulations require that every institution that seeks federal funding for biomedical or behavioral research on human subjects have an institutional review board (IRB) that reviews research proposals. IRBs at universities and other agencies apply ethics standards that are set by federal regulations but can be expanded or specified by the IRB itself (Sieber, 1992:5, 10). To promote adequate review of ethical issues, the regulations require that IRBs include members with diverse backgrounds. The **Office for Protection from Research Risks in the National Institutes of Health** monitors IRBs, with the exception of research involving drugs (which is the responsibility of the federal Food and Drug Administration).

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***Office for Protection from Research Risks, National Institutes of Health:*** Federal agency that monitors institutional review boards (IRBs)

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## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

The American Sociological Association (ASA), like other professional social science organizations, has adopted, for practicing sociologists, ethical guidelines that are more

specific than the federal regulations. Professional organizations may also review complaints of unethical practices when asked.

The *Code of Ethics* of the ASA (1997) is summarized at the ASA Web site ([www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org)); the complete text of the *Code* is also available at this site.

Mostly, ethical issues in research are covered by four guidelines:

1. To protect research subjects
2. To maintain honesty and openness
3. To achieve valid results
4. To encourage appropriate application

Each of these guidelines became a focus of the debate about Milgram's experiments, to which we will refer frequently. Did Stanley Milgram respect the spirit expressed in these principles? You will find that there is no simple answer to the question of what is (or isn't) ethical research practice.

### Protecting Research Subjects

This guideline, our most important, can be divided into four specific directions:

1. Avoid harming research participants.
2. Obtain informed consent.
3. Avoid deception in research, except in limited circumstances.
4. Maintain privacy and confidentiality.

### Avoid Harming Research Participants

This standard may seem straightforward, but can be difficult to interpret in specific cases. Does it mean that subjects should not be harmed even mentally or emotionally? That they should feel no anxiety or distress?

The most serious charge leveled against the ethics of Milgram's study was that he had harmed his subjects. A verbatim transcript of one session will give you an idea of what participants experienced as the "shock generator," which made it appear they were delivering increasingly severe shocks to the "learner" (Milgram, 1965:67):

*150 volts delivered.* You want me to keep going?

*165 volts delivered.* That guy is hollering in there. . . . He's liable to have a heart condition. You want me to go on?

*180 volts delivered.* He can't stand it! I'm not going to kill that man in there! You hear him hollering? He's hollering. He can't stand it. . . . I mean who is going to take responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman? [*The experimenter accepts responsibility.*] All right.

*195 volts delivered.* You see he's hollering. Hear that. Gee, I don't know. [*The experimenter says: "The experiment requires that you go on."*] I know it does, sir, but I mean—phew—he don't know what he's in for. He's up to 195 volts.

*210 volts delivered.*

*225 volts delivered.*

*240 volts delivered.*

The experimental manipulation generated “extraordinary tension” (Milgram, 1963:377):

Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan and dig their fingernails into their flesh. . . . Full-blown, uncontrollable seizures were observed for 3 subjects. One . . . seizure so violently convulsive that it was necessary to call a halt to the experiment [for that individual]. (Milgram 1963:375)

An observer (behind a one-way mirror) reported, “I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse” (Milgram, 1963:377).

Milgram's “Behavioral Study of Obedience” was published in 1963 in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. In the next year, the *American Psychologist* published a critique of the experiment's ethics by psychologist Diana Baumrind (1964:421). From Baumrind's (422) perspective, the emotional disturbance in subjects was “potentially harmful because it could easily effect an alteration in the subject's self-image or ability to trust adult authorities in the future.” Stanley Milgram (1964:849) quickly countered that

momentary excitement is not the same as harm. As the experiment progressed there was no indication of injurious effects in the subjects; and as the subjects themselves strongly endorsed the experiment, the judgment I made was to continue the experiment.

Milgram (1963:374) also attempted to minimize harm to subjects with postexperiment procedures “to assure that the subject would leave the laboratory in a state of well being.” A friendly reconciliation was arranged between the subject and the victim, and an effort was made to reduce any tensions that arose as a result of the experiment.

In some cases, the “dehoaxing” (or “debriefing”) discussion was extensive, and all subjects were promised (and later received) a comprehensive report (Milgram, 1964:849). But Baumrind (1964:422) was unconvinced: “It would be interesting to know what sort of procedures could dissipate the type of emotional disturbance just described.”

When Milgram (1964:849) surveyed subjects in a follow-up, 83.7% endorsed the statement that they were “very glad” or “glad” “to have been in the experiment,” 15.1% were “neither sorry nor glad,” and just 1.3% were “sorry” or “very sorry” to have participated. Interviews by a psychiatrist a year later found no evidence “of any traumatic reactions” (Milgram, 1974:197). Subsequently, Milgram argued that “the central moral justification

for allowing my experiment is that it was judged acceptable by those who took part in it” (Milgram as cited in Cave & Holm, 2003:32).

In a later article, Baumrind (1985:168) dismissed the value of the self-reported “lack of harm” of subjects who had been willing to participate in the experiment and noted that 16% did *not* endorse the statement that they were “glad” they had participated in the experiment. Many social scientists, ethicists, and others concluded that Milgram’s procedures had not harmed subjects and so were justified by the knowledge they produced; others sided with Baumrind’s criticisms (Miller, 1986:88–138).

Or consider the possible harm to subjects in the famous **prison simulation study** at Stanford University (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). The study was designed to investigate the impact of being either a guard or a prisoner in a prison, a “total institution.” The researchers selected apparently stable and mature young male volunteers and asked them to sign a contract to work for 2 weeks as a guard or a prisoner in a simulated prison. Within the first 2 days after the prisoners were incarcerated in a makeshift basement prison, the prisoners began to be passive and disorganized, while the guards became “sadistic”—verbally and physically aggressive (Exhibit 3.6). Five “prisoners” were soon released for depression, uncontrollable crying, fits of rage, and, in one case, a psychosomatic rash. Instead of letting things continue for 2 weeks as planned, Zimbardo and his colleagues terminated the experiment after 6 days to avoid harming subjects.

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**Prison simulation study (Zimbardo’s):** Famous study from the early 1970s, organized by Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo, demonstrating the willingness of average college students quickly to become harsh disciplinarians when put in the role of (simulated) prison guards over other students; usually interpreted as demonstrating an easy human readiness to become cruel

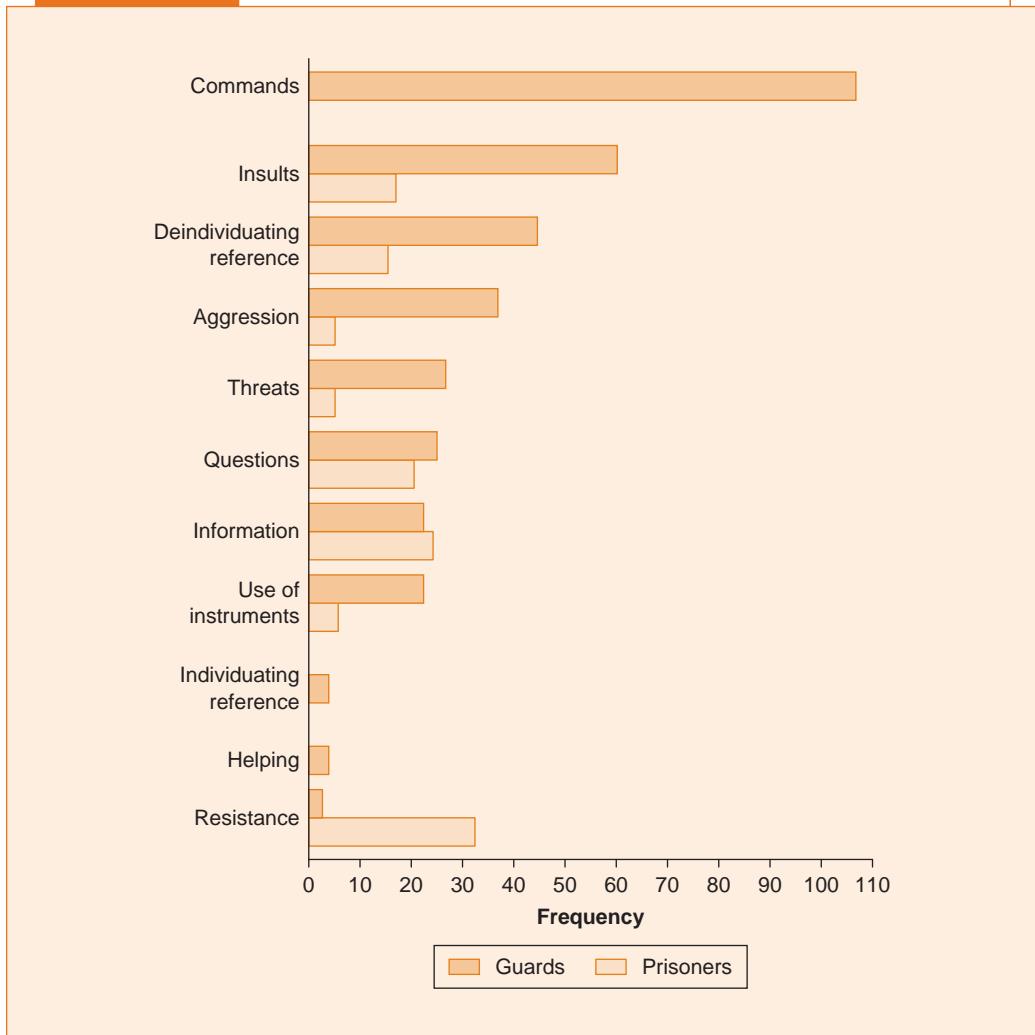
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Participants playing the prisoner role certainly felt some stress, but this seemed to be relieved by postexperiment discussion sessions; follow-up during the next year indicated no lasting negative effects on the participants and some benefits in the form of greater insight. And besides, Zimbardo and his colleagues had no way of predicting the bad outcome; indeed, they were themselves surprised (Haney et al., 1973).

Even well-intentioned researchers may fail to foresee potential ethical problems. Milgram (1974:27–31) reported that he and his colleagues were surprised by the subjects’ willingness to administer such severe shocks. In Zimbardo’s prison simulation, all the participants signed consent forms, but even the researchers did not realize that participants would fall apart so quickly, that some prisoners would have to be released within a few days, or that others would soon be begging to be released from the mock prison. Since some risks cannot be foreseen, they cannot be consented to.

### Obtain Informed Consent

Just defining informed consent may also be more difficult than it first appears. To be informed, consent must be given by persons who are competent to consent, have consented

**EXHIBIT 3.6** Chart of Guard and Prisoner Behavior

voluntarily, are fully informed about the research, and have comprehended what they have been told (Reynolds, 1979). Yet you probably realize, as did Diana Baumrind (1985:165), that due to the inability to communicate perfectly, “Full disclosure of everything that could possibly affect a given subject’s decision to participate is not possible, and therefore cannot be ethically required.”

Obtaining informed consent creates additional challenges for researchers. For instance, the language of the consent form must be clear and understandable yet sufficiently long and detailed to explain what will actually happen in the research. Examples A (Exhibit 3.7) and

B (Exhibit 3.8) illustrate two different approaches to these tradeoffs. Consent form A was approved by a university for a substance abuse survey with undergraduate students. It is brief and to the point but leaves quite a bit to the imagination of the prospective participants. Consent form B reflects the requirements of an academic hospital's IRB. Because the hospital is used to reviewing research proposals involving drugs and other treatment interventions with hospital patients, it requires a very detailed and lengthy explanation of procedures and related issues, even for a simple survey. Requiring prospective participants to sign such lengthy forms can reduce their willingness to participate in research and perhaps influence their responses if they do agree to participate (Larson 1993:114).

When an experimental design requires subject deception, researchers may withhold information before the experiment but then debrief subjects after the experiment ends (Milgram did this). In the **debriefing**, the researcher explains what really happened in the experiment, and why, and responds to subjects' questions. A carefully designed debriefing procedure can often help research participants deal with their anger or embarrassment at having been deceived (Sieber, 1992:39–41), thus substituting for fully informed consent prior to the experiment.

### EXHIBIT 3.7 Consent Form A

#### University of Massachusetts at Boston Department of Sociology

October 28, 1996

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

The health of students and their use of alcohol and drugs are important concerns for every college and university. The enclosed survey is about these issues at UMass/Boston. It is sponsored by University Health Services and the PRIDE Program (Prevention, Resources, Information, and Drug Education). The questionnaire was developed by graduate students in Applied Sociology, Nursing, and Gerontology.

You were selected for the survey with a scientific, random procedure. Now it is important that you return the questionnaire so that we can obtain an unbiased description of the undergraduate student body. Health Services can then use the results to guide campus education and prevention programs.

The survey requires only about 20 minutes to complete. Participation is completely voluntary and anonymous. No one will be able to link your survey responses to you. In any case, your standing at the University will not be affected whether or not you choose to participate. Just be sure to return the enclosed postcard after you mail the questionnaire so that we know we do not have to contact you again.

Please return the survey by November 15th. If you have any questions or comments, call the PRIDE program at 287–5680 or Professor Schutt at 287–6250. Also call the PRIDE program if you would like a summary of our final report.

Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Russell K. Schutt, Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair

**EXHIBIT 3.8**    **Consent Form B****Research Consent Form for Social and Behavioral Research**

Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center

BIDMC/BWH/CH/DFCI/MGH/Partners Network Affiliates

OPRS 11-05

**Protocol Title:** ASSESSING COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS' ATTITUDES AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT EDUCATING COMMUNITIES ABOUT CANCER CLINICAL TRIALS

**DF/HCC Principal Research Investigator / Institution:** Dr. Russell Schutt, Ph.D. / Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and Univ. of Massachusetts, Boston

**DF/HCC Site-Responsible Research Investigator(s) / Institution(s):**

Lidia Schapira, M.D. / Massachusetts General Hospital

**Interview Consent Form****A. INTRODUCTION**

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. Research is a way of gaining new knowledge. A person who participates in a research study is called a "subject." This research study is evaluating whether community health workers might be willing and able to educate communities about the pros and cons of participating in research studies.

It is expected that about 10 people will take part in this research study.

An institution that is supporting a research study either by giving money or supplying something that is important for the research is called the "sponsor." The sponsor of this protocol is National Cancer Institute and is providing money for the research study.

This research consent form explains why this research study is being done, what is involved in participating in the research study, the possible risks and benefits of the research study, alternatives to participation, and your rights as a research subject. The decision to participate is yours. If you decide to participate, please sign and date at the end of the form. We will give you a copy so that you can refer to it while you are involved in this research study.

If you decide to participate in this research study, certain questions will be asked of you to see if you are eligible to be in the research study. The research study has certain requirements that must be met. If the questions show that you can be in the research study, you will be able to answer the interview questions.

If the questions show that you cannot be in the research study, you will not be able to participate in this research study.

Page 1 of 6

DFCI Protocol Number: <u>06-085</u>	Date DFCI IRB Approved This Consent Form: <u>January 16, 2007</u>
Date Posted for Use: <u>January 16, 2007</u>	Date DFCI IRB Approval Expires: <u>August 13, 2007</u>

## Research Consent Form for Social and Behavioral Research

Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center  
 BIDMC/BWH/CH/DFCI/MGH/Partners Network Affiliates

OPRS 11-05

We encourage you to take some time to think this over and to discuss it with other people and to ask questions now and at any time in the future.

### **B. WHY IS THIS RESEARCH STUDY BEING DONE?**

Deaths from cancer in general and for some specific cancers are higher for black people compared to white people, for poor persons compared to nonpoor persons, and for rural residents compared to nonrural residents. There are many reasons for higher death rates between different subpopulations. One important area for changing this is to have more persons from minority groups participate in research about cancer. The process of enrolling minority populations into clinical trials is difficult and does not generally address the needs of their communities. One potential way to increase participation in research is to use community health workers to help educate communities about research and about how to make sure that researchers are ethical. We want to know whether community health workers think this is a good strategy and how to best carry it out.

### **C. WHAT OTHER OPTIONS ARE THERE?**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. Instead of being in this research study, you have the following option:

- Decide not to participate in this research study.

### **D. WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH STUDY?**

**Before the research starts (screening):** After signing this consent form, you will be asked to answer some questions about where you work and the type of community health work you do to find out if you can be in the research study.

If the answers show that you are eligible to participate in the research study, you will be eligible to participate in the research study. If you do not meet the eligibility criteria, you will not be able to participate in this research study.

**After the screening procedures confirm that you are eligible to participate in the research study:**

You will participate in an interview by answering questions from a questionnaire. The interview will take about 90 minutes. If there are questions you prefer not to answer we can skip those questions. The questions are about the type of work you do and your opinions about participating in research. If you agree, the interview will be taped and then transcribed. Your name and no other information about you will be associated:

...

Page 2 of 6

DFCI Protocol Number: <u>06-085</u>	Date DFCI IRB Approved This Consent Form: <u>January 16, 2007</u>
Date Posted for Use: <u>January 16, 2007</u>	Date DFCI IRB Approval Expires: <u>August 13, 2007</u>

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**Research Consent Form for Social and Behavioral Research**

Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center

BIDMC/BWH/CH/DFCI/MGH/Partners Network Affiliates

OPRS 11-05

with the tape or the transcript. Only the research team will be able to listen to the tapes. Immediately following the interview, you will have the opportunity to have the tape erased if you wish to withdraw your consent to taping or participation in this study. You will receive \$30.00 for completing this interview.

**After the interview is completed:** Once you finish the interview there are no additional interventions.

...

**N. DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this research study and my understanding that I can withdraw at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject  
or Legally Authorized Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**To be completed by person obtaining consent:**

The consent discussion was initiated on \_\_\_\_\_ (date) at \_\_\_\_\_ (time).

A copy of this signed consent form was given to the subject or legally authorized representative.

**For Adult Subjects**

The subject is an adult and provided consent to participate.

The subject is an adult who lacks capacity to provide consent, and his/her legally authorized representative:

gave permission for the adult subject to participate

did not give permission for the adult subject to participate

DFCI Protocol Number: 06-085	Date DFCI IRB Approved This Consent Form: January 16, 2007
Date Posted for Use: January 16, 2007	Date DFCI IRB Approval Expires: August 13, 2007

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**Debriefing:** A researcher’s informing subjects after an experiment about the experiment’s purposes and methods and evaluating subjects’ personal reactions to the experiment

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Finally, some participants can’t truly give informed consent. College students, for instance, may feel unable to refuse if their professor asks them to be in an experiment. Legally speaking, children cannot give consent to participate in research; a child’s legal guardian must give written informed consent to have the child participate in research (Sieber, 1992). Then the child must in most circumstances be given the opportunity to give or withhold *assent* to participate in research, usually by a verbal response to an explanation of the research. Special protections exist for other vulnerable populations—prisoners, pregnant women, mentally disabled persons, and educationally or economically disadvantaged persons. And in a sense, anyone deliberately deceived in an experiment cannot be said to really have given “informed” consent, since the person wasn’t honestly told what would happen.

Laud Humphreys (1970) decided that truly informed consent would be impossible to obtain for his study of the social background of men who engage in homosexual behavior in public facilities. Humphreys served as a lookout—a “watch queen”—for men who were entering a public bathroom in a city park with the intention of having sex. In a number of cases, he then left the bathroom and copied the license plate numbers of the cars driven by the men. One year later, he visited the homes of the men and interviewed them as part of a larger study of social issues. Humphreys changed his appearance so that the men did not recognize him. In his book *Tearoom Trade*, Humphreys concluded that the men who engaged in what were widely viewed as deviant acts were, for the most part, married, suburban men whose families were unaware of their sexual practices. But debate has continued ever since about Humphreys’s failure to tell the men what he was really doing in the bathroom or why he had come to their homes for the interview. He was criticized by many, including some faculty members at the University of Washington who urged that his doctoral degree be withheld. However, many other professors and some members of the gay community praised Humphreys for helping to normalize conceptions of homosexuality (Miller, 1986:135).

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**Tearoom Trade:** Book by Laud Humphreys investigating the social background of men who engage in homosexual behavior in public facilities; controversially, he did not obtain informed consent from his subjects

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If you served on your university’s IRB, would you allow research such as Humphreys’s to be conducted?

### **Avoid Deception in Research, Except in Limited Circumstances**

Deception occurs when subjects are misled about research procedures. Frequently, this is done to simulate real-world conditions in the lab. The goal is to get subjects “to accept as

true what is false or to give a false impression” (Korn, 1997:4). In Milgram’s (1964) experiment, for example, deception seemed necessary because actually giving electric shocks to the “stooge” would be cruel. Yet to test obedience, the task had to be troubling for the subjects. Milgram (1992:187–188) insisted that the deception was absolutely essential. Many other psychological and social psychological experiments would be worthless if subjects understood what was really happening to them while the experiment was in progress. But is this sufficient justification to allow the use of deception?

Some important topics have been cleverly studied using deception. Gary Marshall and Philip Zimbardo (of prison study fame), in a 1979 study, told the student volunteers that they were being injected with a vitamin supplement to test its effect on visual acuity (Korn, 1997:2–3). But to determine the physiological basis of emotion, they actually injected them with adrenaline, so that their heart rate and sweating would increase, and then placed them in a room with a student “stooge” who acted silly. Piliavin and Piliavin, in a 1972 study, staged fake seizures on subway trains to study helpfulness (Korn:3–4). Again, would you allow such deceptive practices if you were a member of your university’s IRB? Giving people stimulating drugs, apart from the physical dangers, is using their very bodies for research without their knowledge. Faking an emergency may lessen one’s willingness to help in the future or may, in effect, punish the research subjects—through embarrassment—for their reaction to what is really “just an experiment.”

But perhaps risk, not deception per se, is the real problem. Aronson and Mills’s (1959) study of severity of initiation to groups is a good example of experimental research that does not pose greater-than-everyday risks to subjects but still uses deception. This study was conducted at an all-women’s college in the 1950s. The student volunteers who were randomly assigned to the “severe initiation” experimental condition had to read a list of embarrassing words. Even in the 1950s, reading a list of potentially embarrassing words in a laboratory setting, then listening to a taped discussion, was unlikely to increase the risks to which students were exposed in their everyday lives. Moreover, the researchers informed subjects that they would be expected to talk about sex and could decline to participate in the experiment if this requirement would bother them. None dropped out. To further ensure that no psychological harm was caused, Aronson and Mills explained the true nature of the experiment to subjects after the experiment. The subjects did not seem perturbed: “None of the Ss expressed any resentment or annoyance at having been misled. In fact, the majority were intrigued by the experiment, and several returned at the end of the academic quarter to ascertain the result” (179).

Are you satisfied that this procedure caused no harm? The minimal deception in the Aronson and Mills experiment, coupled with the lack of any ascertainable risk to subjects and a debriefing, satisfies the ethical standards for research of most psychologists and IRBs, even today.

### **Maintain Privacy and Confidentiality**

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality after a study is completed is another way to protect subjects, and the researcher’s commitment to that standard should be included in the informed

consent agreement (Sieber, 1992). Procedures to protect each subject's privacy, such as locking records and creating special identifying codes, must be created to minimize the risk of access by unauthorized persons. For the protection of health care data, the **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)** passed by Congress in 1996 created much more stringent regulations. As implemented by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2000 (and revised in 2002), the HIPAA Final Privacy Rule applies to oral, written, and electronic information that "relates to the past, present, or future physical or mental health or condition of an individual" (Legal Information Institute, 2006, § 1320d[6][B]). The HIPAA Rule requires that researchers have valid authorization for any use or disclosure of "protected health information" (PHI) from a health care provider. Waivers of authorization can be granted in special circumstances (Cava, Cushman, & Goodman, 2007).

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***Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA):*** A U.S. federal law passed in 1996 that guarantees, among other things, specified privacy rights for medical patients, in particular those in research settings

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However, statements about confidentiality also need to be realistic. The law allows even confidential research records to be subpoenaed and may require reporting child abuse. A researcher may feel compelled to release information if a health- or life-threatening situation arises and participants need to be alerted. The National Institutes of Health can issue a **Certificate of Confidentiality** to protect researchers from being legally required to disclose confidential information. Researchers who are focusing on high-risk populations or behaviors or sensitive topics, such as crime, substance abuse, sexual activity, or genetic information, can request such a certificate. Suspicions of child abuse or neglect must still be reported, and in some states, researchers may still be required to report such crimes as elder abuse (Arwood & Panicker, 2007).

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***Certificate of Confidentiality:*** Document issued by the National Institutes of Health to protect researchers from being legally required to disclose confidential information

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### **Maintaining Honesty and Openness**

Protecting subjects, then, is the primary focus of research ethics. But researchers have obligations to other groups, including the scientific community, whose concern with validity requires that scientists be open in disclosing their methods and honest in presenting their findings. To assess the validity of a researcher's conclusions and the ethics of his or her procedures, you need to know how the research was conducted. This means that articles or other reports must include a detailed methodology section, perhaps supplemented by appendixes containing the research instruments or Web sites or other contact information where more information can be obtained. Biases or political motives should be

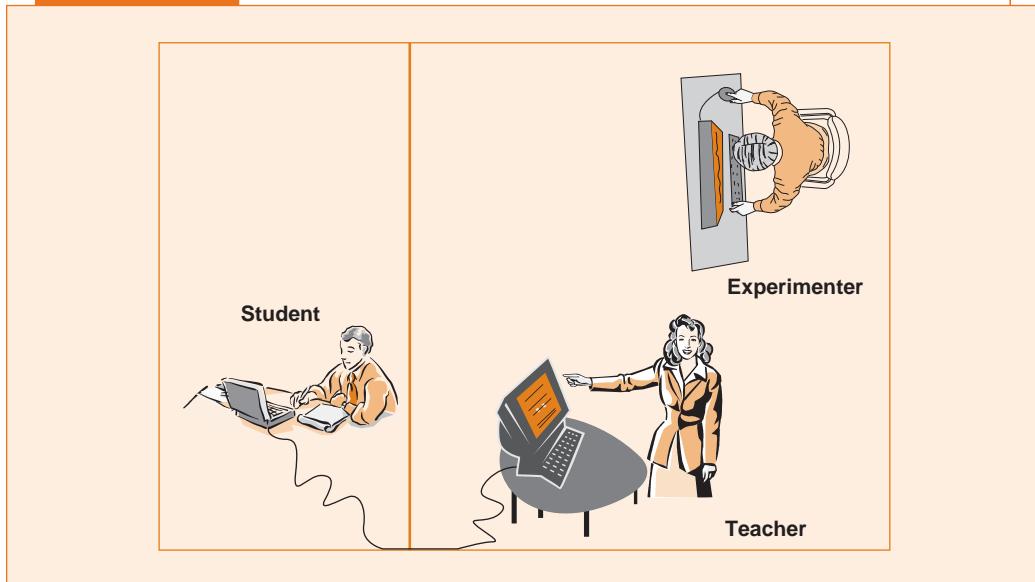
acknowledged, since research distorted by political or personal pressures to find particular outcomes is unlikely to be carried out in an honest and open fashion.

Stanley Milgram's research exemplifies adherence to the goal of honesty and openness (Exhibit 3.9). His initial 1963 article included a description of study procedures, including details about the procedures involved in the learning task, administration of the "sample shock," the shock instructions and the preliminary practice run, the standardized feedback from the "victim" and from the experimenter, and the measures used. Many more details, including pictures, were provided in Milgram's (1974) subsequent book.

The act of publication itself is a vital element in maintaining openness and honesty, since then others can review procedures and debate with the researcher. Although Milgram disagreed sharply with Diana Baumrind's criticisms of his experiments, their mutual commitment to public discourse in journals widely available to psychologists resulted in more comprehensive presentation of study procedures and more thoughtful conversation about research ethics. Almost 50 years later, this commentary continues to inform debates about research ethics (Cave & Holm, 2003).

In spite of this need for openness, researchers may hesitate to disclose their procedures or results to prevent others from "stealing" their ideas and taking the credit. However, failure to be open about procedures can result in difficult disputes. In the 1980s, for instance, as mentioned in Chapter 2, there was a long legal battle between a U.S. researcher, Dr. Robert Gallo, and a French researcher, Dr. Luc Montagnier, both of whom claimed credit for discovering the AIDS virus. Eventually the dispute was settled at the

### EXHIBIT 3.9 Diagram of Milgram Experiment



highest levels of government, through an agreement announced by American President Ronald Reagan and French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac (Altman, 1987). Gallo and Montagnier jointly developed a chronology of discovery as part of the agreement. Enforcing standards of honesty and encouraging openness about research are often the best solutions to such problems.

### Achieving Valid Results

It is the pursuit of objective knowledge—the goal of validity—that justifies our investigations and our claims to the use of human subjects. We have no business asking people to answer questions, submit to observations, or participate in experiments if we are simply trying to trumpet our own prejudices or pursue our personal interests. If, on the other hand, we approach our research projects objectively, setting aside our predilections in the service of learning a bit more about human behavior, we can honestly represent our actions as potentially contributing to the advancement of knowledge.

The details in Milgram’s 1963 article and 1974 book on the **obedience experiments** make a compelling case for his commitment to achieving valid results—to learning how obedience influences behavior. In Milgram’s (1963:371) own words,

It has been reliably established that from 1933–45 millions of innocent persons were systematically slaughtered on command. . . . Obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority . . . for many persons obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency. . . . Obedience may [also] be ennobling and educative and refer to acts of charity and kindness, as well as to destruction.

Milgram (1963:372) then explains how he devised experiments to study the process of obedience in a way that would seem realistic to the subjects and still allow “important variables to be manipulated at several points in the experiment.” Every step in the experiment was carefully designed to ensure that subjects received identical stimuli and that their responses were measured carefully.

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***Obedience experiments (Milgram’s):*** A series of famous experiments conducted during the 1960s by Stanley Milgram, a psychologist from Yale University, testing subjects’ willingness to cause pain to another person if instructed to do so

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Milgram’s (1963:377) attention to validity is also apparent in his reflections on “the particular conditions” of his experiment, for, he notes, “Understanding of the phenomenon of obedience must rest on an analysis of [these conditions].” These particular conditions included the setting for the experiment at Yale University, its purported “worthy purpose”

to advance knowledge about learning and memory, and the voluntary participation of the subject as well as of the Learner—as far as the subject knew. The importance of some of these “particular conditions” (such as the location at Yale) was then tested in subsequent replications of the basic experiment (Milgram, 1965).

However, not all psychologists agreed that Milgram’s approach could achieve valid results. Baumrind’s (1964:423) critique begins with a rejection of the external validity—the generalizability—of the experiment. “The laboratory is unfamiliar as a setting and the rules of behavior ambiguous. . . . Therefore, the laboratory is not the place to study degree of obedience or suggestibility, as a function of a particular experimental condition.” And so, “the parallel between authority-subordinate relationships in Hitler’s Germany and in Milgram’s laboratory is unclear.”

Stanley Milgram (1964:850) quickly published a rejoinder in which he disagreed with (among other things) the notion that it is inappropriate to study obedience in a laboratory setting: “A subject’s obedience is no less problematical because it occurs within a social institution called the psychological experiment.”

Milgram (1974:169–178) also pointed out that his experiment had been replicated in other places and settings with the same results, that there was considerable evidence that subjects had believed that they actually were administering shocks, and that the “essence” of his experimental manipulation—the request that subjects comply with a legitimate authority—was shared with the dilemma faced by people in Nazi Germany and soldiers at the My Lai massacre in Vietnam (Miller, 1986:182–183).

But Baumrind (1985:171) was still not convinced. In a follow-up article in the *American Psychologist*, she argued that “far from illuminating real life, as he claimed, Milgram in fact appeared to have constructed a set of conditions so internally inconsistent that they could not occur in real life.”

Milgram assumed that obedience could fruitfully be studied in the laboratory; Baumrind disagreed. Both, however, buttressed their ethical arguments with assertions about the external validity (or invalidity) of the experimental results. They agreed, in other words, that a research study is in part justified by its valid findings—the knowledge to be gained. If the findings aren’t valid, they can’t justify the research at all. It is hard to justify any risk for human subjects, or even any expenditure of time and resources, if our findings tell us nothing about human behavior.

### Encouraging Appropriate Application

Finally, scientists must consider the uses to which their research is put. Although many scientists believe that personal values should be left outside the laboratory, some feel that it is proper—even necessary—for scientists to concern themselves with the way their research is used.

Stanley Milgram made it clear that he was concerned about the phenomenon of obedience precisely because of its implications for people’s welfare. As you have already learned, his first article (1963) highlighted the atrocities committed under the Nazis by

citizens and soldiers who were “just following orders.” In his more comprehensive book on the obedience experiments (1974), he also used his findings to shed light on the atrocities committed in the Vietnam War at My Lai, slavery, the destruction of the American Indian population, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Milgram makes no explicit attempt to “tell us what to do” about this problem. In fact, as a dispassionate psychological researcher, Milgram (1974:xi) tells us, “What the present study [did was] to give the dilemma [of obedience to authority] contemporary form by treating it as subject matter for experimental inquiry, and with the aim of understanding rather than judging it from a moral standpoint.”

Yet it is impossible to ignore the very practical implications of Milgram’s investigations. His research highlighted the extent of obedience to authority and identified multiple factors that could be manipulated to lessen blind obedience (such as encouraging dissent by just one group member, removing the subject from direct contact with the authority figure, and increasing the contact between the subject and the victim).

A widely publicized experiment on the police response to domestic violence provides an interesting cautionary tale about the uses of science. Lawrence Sherman and Richard Berk (1984) arranged with the Minneapolis police department for the random assignment of persons accused of domestic violence to be either arrested or simply given a warning. The results of this field experiment indicated that those who were arrested were less likely subsequently to commit violent acts against their partners. Sherman (1993) explicitly cautioned police departments not to adopt mandatory arrest policies based solely on the results of the Minneapolis experiment, but the results were publicized in the mass media and encouraged many jurisdictions to change their policies (Binder & Meeker, 1993; Lempert, 1989). Although we now know that the original finding of a deterrent effect of arrest did not hold up in many other cities where the experiment was repeated, Sherman (1992:150–153) later suggested that implementing mandatory arrest policies might have prevented some subsequent cases of spouse abuse. In particular, in a follow-up study in Omaha, arrest warrants reduced repeat offenses among spouse abusers who had already left the scene when police arrived. However, this Omaha finding was not publicized, so it could not be used to improve police policies. So how much publicity is warranted, and at what point in the research should it occur?

Social scientists who conduct research on behalf of specific organizations may face additional difficulties when the organization, instead of the researcher, controls the final report and the publicity it receives. If organizational leaders decide that particular research results are unwelcome, the researcher’s desire to have findings used appropriately and reported fully can conflict with contractual obligations. Researchers can anticipate such dilemmas and resolve them when the contract is negotiated—or simply decline a particular research opportunity altogether. But often such problems arise only after a report has been drafted, or the problems are ignored by a researcher who needs the job or to maintain a personal relationship. These possibilities cannot be avoided entirely, but because of them, it is always important to acknowledge the source of research funding in reports and to consider carefully the sources of funding for research reports written by others.

## CONCLUSION

Different kinds of research produce different kinds of ethical problems. Most survey research, for instance, creates few if any ethical problems and can even be enjoyable for participants. In fact, researchers from Michigan’s Institute for Survey Research interviewed a representative national sample of adults and found that 68% of those who had participated in a survey were somewhat or very interested in participating in another; the more times respondents had been interviewed, the more willing they were to participate again (Reynolds, 1979:56–57). On the other hand, some experimental studies in the social sciences that have put people in uncomfortable or embarrassing situations have generated vociferous complaints and years of debate about ethics (Reynolds; Sjöberg, 1967).

Research ethics should be based on a realistic assessment of the overall potential for harm and benefit to research subjects. In this chapter, we have presented some basic guidelines, and examples in other chapters suggest applications, but answers aren’t always obvious. For example, full disclosure of “what is really going on” in an experimental study is unnecessary if subjects are unlikely to be harmed. In one student observation study on cafeteria workers, for instance, the IRB didn’t require consent forms to be signed. The legalistic forms and signatures, they felt, would be more intrusive or upsetting to workers than the very benign and confidential research itself. The committee put the feelings of subjects above the strict requirement for consent.

Ultimately, then, these decisions about ethical procedures are not just up to you, as a researcher, to make. Your university’s IRB sets the human subjects protection standards for your institution and will require that researchers—even, in most cases, students—submit their research proposal to the IRB for review. So the ethical propriety of your research will be guarded by an institutional committee, following professional codes and guidelines; but still, that is an uncertain substitute for your own conscience.

### KEY TERMS

<i>Belmont Report</i>	Nuremberg war crime trials
Beneficence	Obedience experiments (Milgram’s)
Certificate of Confidentiality	Office for Protection from Research Risks, National Institutes of Health
Debriefing	Prison simulation study (Zimbardo’s)
Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects	Respect for persons
Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)	<i>Tearoom Trade</i>
Justice	Tuskegee syphilis study

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments led to intensive debate about the extent to which deception could be tolerated in psychological research and how harm to subjects should be evaluated.

- Egregious violations of human rights by researchers, including scientists in Nazi Germany and researchers in the Tuskegee syphilis study, led to the adoption of federal ethical standards for research on human subjects.
- The 1979 *Belmont Report* developed by a national commission established three basic ethical standards for the protection of human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.
- The Department of Health and Human Services adopted in 1991 the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. The policy requires that every institution seeking federal funding for biomedical or behavioral research on human subjects have an institutional review board to exercise oversight.
- Standards for the protection of human subjects require avoiding harm, obtaining informed consent, avoiding deception except in limited circumstances, and maintaining privacy and confidentiality.
- Scientific research should maintain high standards for validity and be conducted and reported in an honest and open fashion.
- Effective debriefing of subjects after an experiment can help to reduce the risk of harm due to the use of deception in the experiment.

### STUDENT STUDY SITE

To assist you in completing the Web Exercises, please access the Study Site at <http://www.pineforge.com/mssw3>, where you'll find the Web Exercises with accompanying links. You'll find other useful study materials like self-quizzes and e-flashcards for each chapter, along with a group of carefully selected articles from research journals that illustrate the major concepts and techniques presented in the book.

## EXERCISES

### Discussing Research

1. Should social scientists be permitted to conduct replications of Milgram's obedience experiments? Zimbardo's prison simulation? Can you justify such research as permissible within the current ASA ethical standards? If not, do you believe that these standards should be altered so as to permit Milgram-type research?
2. Why does unethical research occur? Is it inherent in science? Does it reflect "human nature"? What makes ethical research more or less likely?
3. Does debriefing solve the problem of subject deception? How much must researchers reveal after the experiment is over, as well as before it begins?

### Finding Research

1. The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) offers an extensive online training course in the basics of human subjects protections issues. Go to the public access CITI site at <https://www.citiprogram.org/rcrpage.asp?affiliation=100> and complete the course in social and behavioral research. Write a short summary of what you have learned.

2. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains extensive resources concerning the protection of human subjects in research. Read several documents that you find on its Web site at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/> and share your findings in a short report.

### Critiquing Research

1. Pair up with one other student and select one of the research articles you have reviewed for other exercises. Criticize the research in terms of its adherence to each of the ethical principles for research on human subjects, as well as for the authors' apparent honesty, openness, and consideration of social consequences. Try to be critical but fair. The student with whom you are working should critique the article in the same way but from a generally positive standpoint, defending its adherence to the four guidelines but without ignoring the study's weak points. Together, write a summary of the study's strong and weak points or conduct a debate in class.
2. How do you evaluate the current American Sociological Association ethical code? Is it too strict, too lenient, or just about right? Are the enforcement provisions adequate? What provisions could be strengthened?
3. IRB members and the researchers who submit proposals to them must be familiar with a number of key concepts about ethical principles. The "Ethics" lesson at the text's study site will help you learn how to do this.

To use these lessons, choose one of the four "Ethics" exercises from the opening menu for the Interactive Exercises. Follow the instructions for entering your answers and responding to the program's comments.

4. Now go to the book's Study Site at <http://www.pineforge.com/mssw3> and choose the Learning from Journal Articles option. Read one article based on research involving human subjects. What ethical issues did the research pose, and how were they resolved? Does it seem that subjects were appropriately protected?

### Doing Research

1. List elements in a research plan for the project you envisioned for Chapter 2's "Doing Research" section that an IRB might consider to be relevant to the protection of human subjects. Rate each element from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates no more than a minor ethical issue and 5 indicates a major ethical problem that probably cannot be resolved.
2. Write one page for the application to the IRB that explains how you will ensure that your research adheres to each relevant standard.

### Ethics Questions

1. Read the entire American Sociological Association *Code of Ethics* at the ASA Web site ([http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/ethics/code\\_of\\_ethics\\_table\\_of\\_contents](http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/ethics/code_of_ethics_table_of_contents)).
2. Discuss the potential challenges in adhering to the ASA's ethical standards in research.