

## CHAPTER 3

# Research Ethics and Philosophies

### Historical Background

### Ethical Principles

Achieving Valid Results  
 Honesty and Openness  
 Protecting Research Participants  
*Avoid Harming Research Participants*  
*Obtain Informed Consent*  
*Avoid Deception in Research,*  
*Except in Limited Circumstances*

*Maintain Privacy and Confidentiality*

The Uses of Research

### Philosophical Issues

Positivism and Postpositivism  
 Positivist Research Guidelines  
 Interpretivism and Constructivism  
 Interpretivist/Constructivist Research  
 Guidelines

### Conclusions

**L**et's begin with a thought experiment (or a trip down memory lane, depending on your earlier exposure to this example). 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. "Earn money and learn about yourself," it says. Feeling a bit bored with your job as a high school teacher, you call and schedule an evening visit to the lab.

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

*Persons Needed for a Study of Memory*

You arrive at the assigned room at the university, ready for an interesting hour or so, and are impressed immediately 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 and introduces himself and explains that as a psychologist, he is interested in the question of whether people learn things better when they are punished for making a mistake. He quickly convinces you that this is a very important question for which there has been no adequate answer; he then explains that his

## 68 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

experiment on punishment and learning will help answer this question. 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 out 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 down, attaches a wire to his left wrist and straps both his arms to the chair so that he cannot remove the wire (Exhibit 3.1). The wire is connected to a console with 30 switches and a large dial on the other side of the room. When you ask what the wire is for, the experimenter says he will demonstrate. He then asks you to hold the end of the wire, walks back to the control console, flips several switches and focuses his attention on the dial. You hear a clicking noise, see the dial move, and then feel an electric shock in your hand. The shock increases and the dial registers more current when the experimenter flips the next switch on the console.

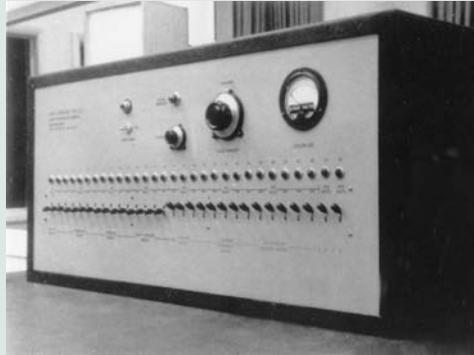
“Oh, I see,” you say. “This is the punishment. Couldn’t it cause injury?” The experimenter explains that the machine is calibrated so that it will not cause permanent injury, but acknowledges that when it is turned up all the way it is very, very painful and can result in severe, although momentary, discomfort.

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

### 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.

**EXHIBIT 3.2** Milgram's "Shock Generator"

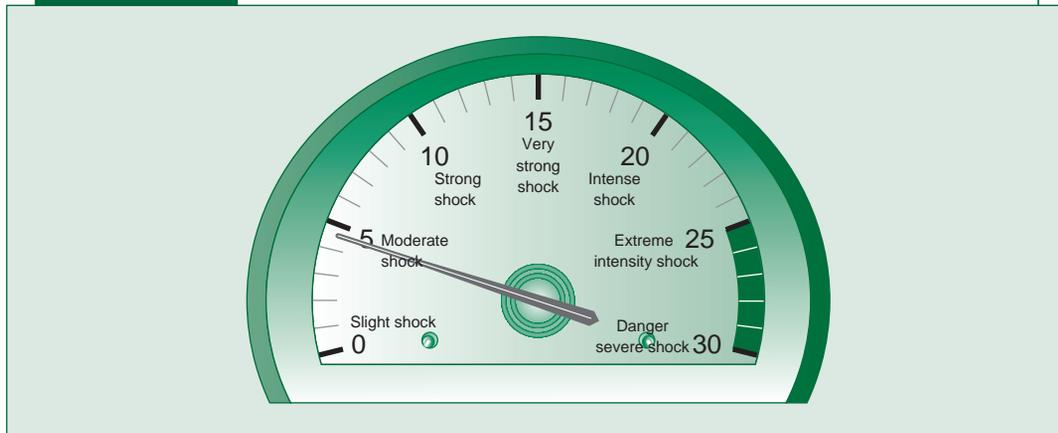
Source: From the film *OBEDIENCE* © 1968 by Stanley Milgram, © Renewed 1993 by Alexandra Milgram, and distributed by Penn State, Media Sales.

read aloud a series of word pairs, such as “blue box,” “nice day,” “wild duck,” and so on. (2) Next, you read one of the first words from those pairs and a set of four words, one of which contains 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 there is a label corresponding to every fifth 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.”

You begin. The learner at first gives some correct answers, but then he makes a few errors. Soon you are beyond the 5th mark (“moderate shock”) and are moving in the direction of more and more severe shocks. You recall having heard about this experiment and so you know that as you turn the dial, the learner’s responses increase in intensity from a grunt at the 10th mark (“strong shock”) to painful groans at higher levels, anguished cries to “get me out of here” at the “extreme intensity shock” levels, to a deathly silence at the highest level. You also know that as you proceed and indicate your discomfort at administering the stronger shocks, the experimenter will inform you that “The experiment requires that you continue,” and occasionally, “It is absolutely essential that you continue.” Please mark on the meter below the most severe shock that you would agree to give to the learner (Exhibit 3.3).

You may very well recognize that this thought experiment is a slightly simplified version of the famous “obedience” experiments by Stanley Milgram, begun at Yale University in 1960. Did you know that Milgram also surveyed Yale undergraduates and asked them to indicate at what level they would terminate their “shocks”? 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, but only barely so, for he said he would stop at the “very strong” level. Responses were similar from nonstudent groups who were asked the same question.

## 70 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

**EXHIBIT 3.3** Shock Meter

What was the actual average level of shock administered by the 40 New Haven adults who volunteered for the experiment? A shock level of 24.53, or a level higher than “extreme intensity shock” and just short of the “danger: severe shock” level. Of Milgram’s original 40 subjects, 25 (62.5%) complied with the experimenter’s demands, all the way to the top of the scale (originally labeled simply as “XXX”). And lest you pass this result off as simply the result of the subjects having thought that the experiment wasn’t “real,” we hasten to point out that there is abundant evidence from the subjects’ own observed high stress and their subsequent reports that they really believed that the learner was receiving actual, hurtful shocks.

Are you surprised by the subjects’ responses? By the Yale undergraduates’ predictions of so many compassionate responses? By your own response? (I leave it to you to assess how accurately you predicted the response you would have given if you had been an actual subject.)

Of course, my purpose in introducing this small “experiment” is not to focus attention on the prediction of obedience to authority; instead, I want to introduce the topic of research ethics by encouraging you to think about research from the standpoint of the people who are the subjects of behavioral research. I will refer to Stanley Milgram’s research on obedience throughout this chapter, since it is fair to say that this research ultimately had as profound an influence on the way that social scientists think about research ethics as it had on the way that they understand obedience to authority.

Every social scientist needs to consider how to practice their discipline ethically. Whenever we interact with other people as social scientists we must give paramount importance to the rational concerns and emotional needs that will shape their responses to our actions. It is here that ethical research practice begins, with the recognition that our research procedures involve people who deserve as much respect for their well-being as we do for ours.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Formal procedures for the protection of participants in research grew out of some widely pub-

licized abuses. A defining event occurred in 1946, when the **Nuremberg War Crime Trials** exposed horrific medical experiments conducted by Nazi doctors and others in the name of “science.” In the 1970s, Americans were shocked to learn that researchers funded by the U.S. Public Health Service had followed 399 low-income African American men with syphilis in the 1930s, collecting data to study the “natural” course of the illness. Many participants were not informed of their illness and were denied treatment until 1972, even though a cure (penicillin) was developed in the 1950s.

Egregious violations of human rights similar to these 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**” (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1979) established three basic ethical principles for the protection of human subjects (Exhibit 3.5):

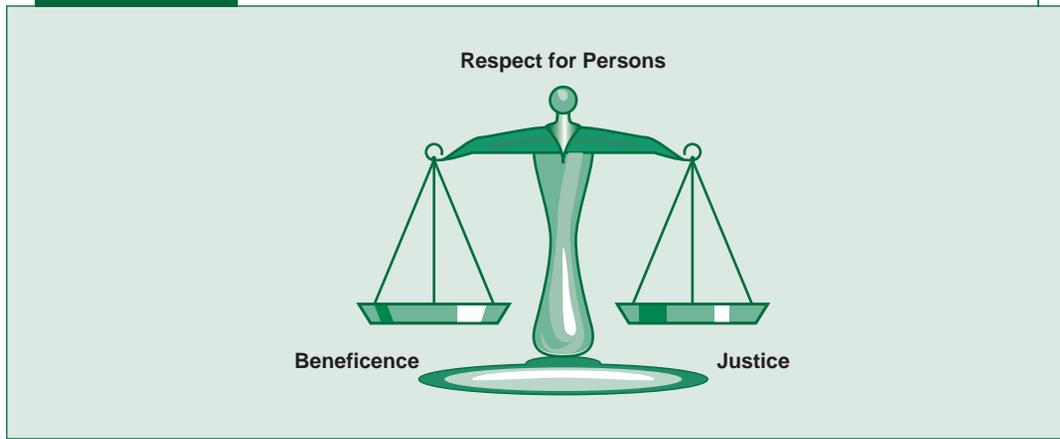
- **Respect for persons:** Treating persons as autonomous agents and protecting those with diminished autonomy;
- **Beneficence:** Minimizing possible harms and maximizing benefits; and
- **Justice:** Distributing benefits and risks of research fairly.

The Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration then translated these principles into specific regulations that were adopted in 1991 as the

#### EXHIBIT 3.4 Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment



## 72 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

**EXHIBIT 3.5** Belmont Report Principles

**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. Professional associations such as the **American Sociological Association**, university review boards, and ethics committees in other organizations also set standards for the treatment of human subjects by their members, employees, and students, although these standards are all designed to comply with the federal policy. This section introduces these regulations.

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 ethical 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).

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 on the ASA Web site [www.asanet.org/page.wv?section=Ethics&name=Ethics](http://www.asanet.org/page.wv?section=Ethics&name=Ethics); the complete text of the Code is also available at this site.

## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

### Achieving Valid Results

Commitment to achieving valid results is the necessary starting point for ethical research

practice. Simply put, we have no business asking people to answer questions, submit to observations, or participate in experimental procedures, if we are simply seeking to verify our preexisting prejudices or convince others to take action on behalf of our personal interests. It is the pursuit of objective knowledge about human behavior—the goal of validity—that motivates and justifies our investigations and gives us some claim to the right to influence others to participate in our research. Knowledge is the foundation of human progress as well as the basis for our expectation that we, as behavioral scientists, can help people achieve a brighter future. If we approach our research projects objectively, setting aside our personal 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 **Milgram's obedience experiments** make a compelling case for his commitment to achieving valid results—to learning how and why obedience influences behavior. In Milgram's (1963) 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. (p. 371)

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 the subjects received identical stimuli and that their responses were measured carefully.

Milgram's (1963) 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]” (p. 377). 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 social scientists agreed that Milgram's approach could achieve valid results. The “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). Her critique begins with a rejection of the external validity—the generalizability—of the experiment. Because “The laboratory is unfamiliar as a setting and the rules of behavior ambiguous,” 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” (p. 423).

Stanley Milgram (1964) 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

## 74 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

the psychological experiment” (p. 850).

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 the 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, soldiers at the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, and even cultists who drank poison in Jonestown, Guyana, at the command of their leader, Jim Jones (Miller 1986:182–183).

Diana 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” (p. 171).

Do you agree with Milgram’s assumption that obedience could fruitfully be studied in the laboratory? Do you find merit in Baumrind’s criticism? Will your evaluation of the ethics of Milgram’s experiments be influenced by your answers to these questions? Should our standards differ when we judge the results of a study to provide valid information about important social psychological processes?

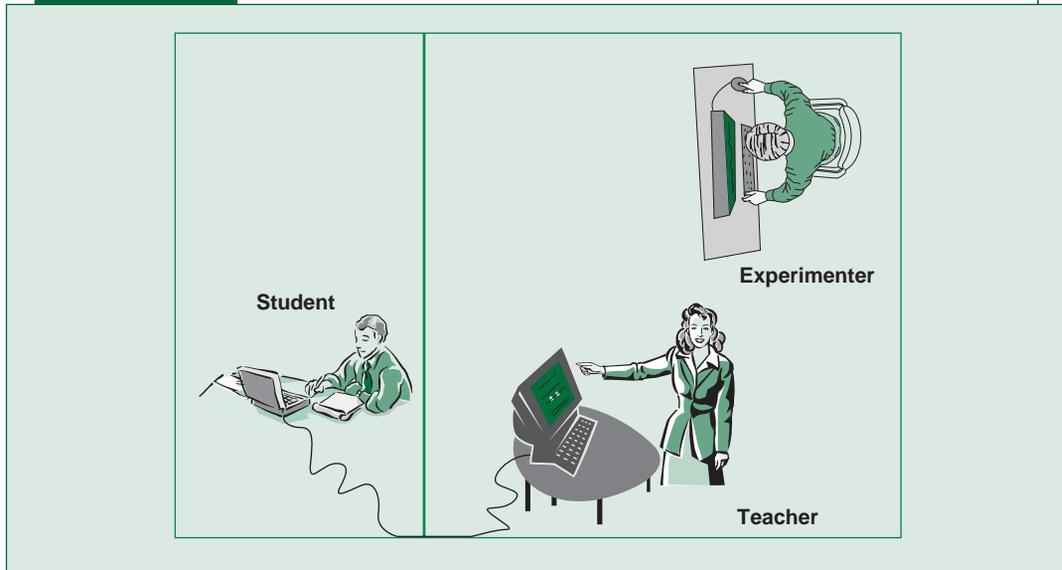
I can’t answer these questions for you, but before you dismiss them as inappropriate when we are dealing with ethical standards for the treatment of human subjects, bear in mind that both Milgram and his strongest critic, Baumrind, buttressed their ethical arguments with assertions about the external validity (or invalidity) of the experimental results. 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.

### Honesty and Openness

The scientific concern with validity requires in turn that scientists be open in disclosing their methods and honest in presenting their findings. In contrast, research distorted by political or personal pressures to find particular outcomes or to achieve the most marketable results is unlikely to be carried out in an honest and open fashion. To assess the validity of a researcher’s conclusions and the ethics of their procedures, you need to know exactly how the research was conducted. This means that articles or other reports must include a detailed methodology section, perhaps supplemented by appendices containing the research instruments or Web sites or an address where more information can be obtained.

Stanley Milgram’s research reports seemed to present an honest and open account of his methods. His initial 1963 article included a detailed description of study procedures, including the text of the general introduction, the procedures involved in the learning task—“shock generator,” 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 (Exhibit 3.6).

The act of publication itself is a vital element in maintaining openness and honesty. Others can review and question study procedures and so generate an open dialogue with the researcher. Although Milgram disagreed sharply with Diana Baumrind’s criticisms of his experiments, their mutual commitment to public discourse in journals widely available to social scientists resulted in a more comprehensive presentation of study procedures and a more thoughtful discourse about research ethics. Almost 50 years later, this commentary

**EXHIBIT 3.6** Diagram of Milgram Experiment

continues to inform debates about research ethics (Cave & Holm 2003).

Openness about research procedures and results goes hand in hand with honesty in research design. Openness is also essential if researchers are to learn from the work of others. In spite of this need for openness, some researchers may hesitate to disclose their procedures or results to prevent others from building on their ideas and taking some of the credit. You might have heard of the long legal battle between a U.S. researcher, Dr. Robert Gallo, and a French researcher, Dr. Luc Montagnier, about how credit for discovering the AIDS virus should be allocated. Although a public dispute such as this one is unusual—even more unusual its resolution through an agreement announced by the then-President Ronald Reagan and the then-Prime Minister Jacques Chirac (Altman 1987)—concerns with priority of discovery are common. Scientists are like other people in their desire to be first. Enforcing standards of honesty and encouraging openness about research are the best solutions to these problems (as exemplified by the chronology of discovery that Gallo and Montagnier jointly developed as part of the agreement).

### Protecting Research Participants

The Code's standards concerning the treatment of human subjects include federal regulations and ethical guidelines emphasized by most professional social science organizations:

- Research should cause no harm to subjects.
- Participation in research should be voluntary, and therefore subjects must give their informed consent to participate in the research.
- Researchers should fully disclose their identity.
- Anonymity or confidentiality must be maintained for individual research participants unless it is voluntarily and explicitly waived.
- Benefits from a research project should outweigh any foreseeable risks.

## 76 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

Each of these standards became a focus of debate about Milgram's experiments, so we will return frequently to that debate in order to keep our discussion realistic. We will also refer frequently to the ASA Code in order to keep our treatment current. You will soon realize that there is no simple answer to the question: What "is" (or "isn't") ethical research practice? The issues are just too complicated and the relevant principles too subject to different interpretations. But we do promise that by the time you finish this chapter, you will be aware of the major issues in research ethics and be able to make informed, defensible decisions about the ethical conduct of social science research.

### Avoid Harming Research Participants

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

Before we address these questions with respect to Milgram's experiments, a verbatim transcript of one session will give you an idea of what participants experienced (Milgram 1965:67):

- 150 volts delivered.* You want me to keep going?
- 165 volts delivered.* That guy is hollering in there. There's a lot of them here. 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—hugh—he don't know what he's in for. He's up to 195 volts.

*210 volts delivered.*

*225 volts delivered.*

*240 volts delivered.*

This 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. [O]ne . . . seizure so violently convulsive that it was necessary to call a halt to the experiment [for that individual]. (p. 375)

An observer (behind a one-way mirror) reported (Milgram 1963), “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” (p. 377).

From critic Diana Baumrind’s (1964) perspective, this 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” (p. 422). Stanley Milgram (1964) 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. (p. 849)

When Milgram (1964) surveyed the 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 (p. 849). Interviews by a psychiatrist a year later found no evidence “of any traumatic reactions.” (p. 197). Subsequently, Milgram (1977) argued that “the central moral justification for allowing my experiment is that it was judged acceptable by those who took part in it” (p. 21).

Milgram (1963) also attempted to minimize harm to subjects with postexperimental procedures “to assure that the subject would leave the laboratory in a state of well being” (p. 374). 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).

Professor Baumrind (1964) was unconvinced: “It would be interesting to know what sort of procedures could dissipate the type of emotional disturbance just described [quoting Milgram]” (p. 422).

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—although noting that still 16% did NOT endorse the statement that they were “glad” they had participated in the experiment. Baumrind (1985:169) also argued that research indicates that most introductory psychology students (and some students in other social sciences) who have participated in a deception experiment report a decreased trust in authorities as a result—a tangible harm in itself.

Many social scientists, ethicists, and others concluded that Milgram’s procedures had not harmed the subjects and so were justified for the knowledge they produced, but others sided with Baumrind’s criticisms (Miller 1986:88–138). What is your opinion at this point? Does Milgram’s debriefing process relieve your concerns? Are you as persuaded by the subjects’ own endorsement of the procedures as was Milgram?

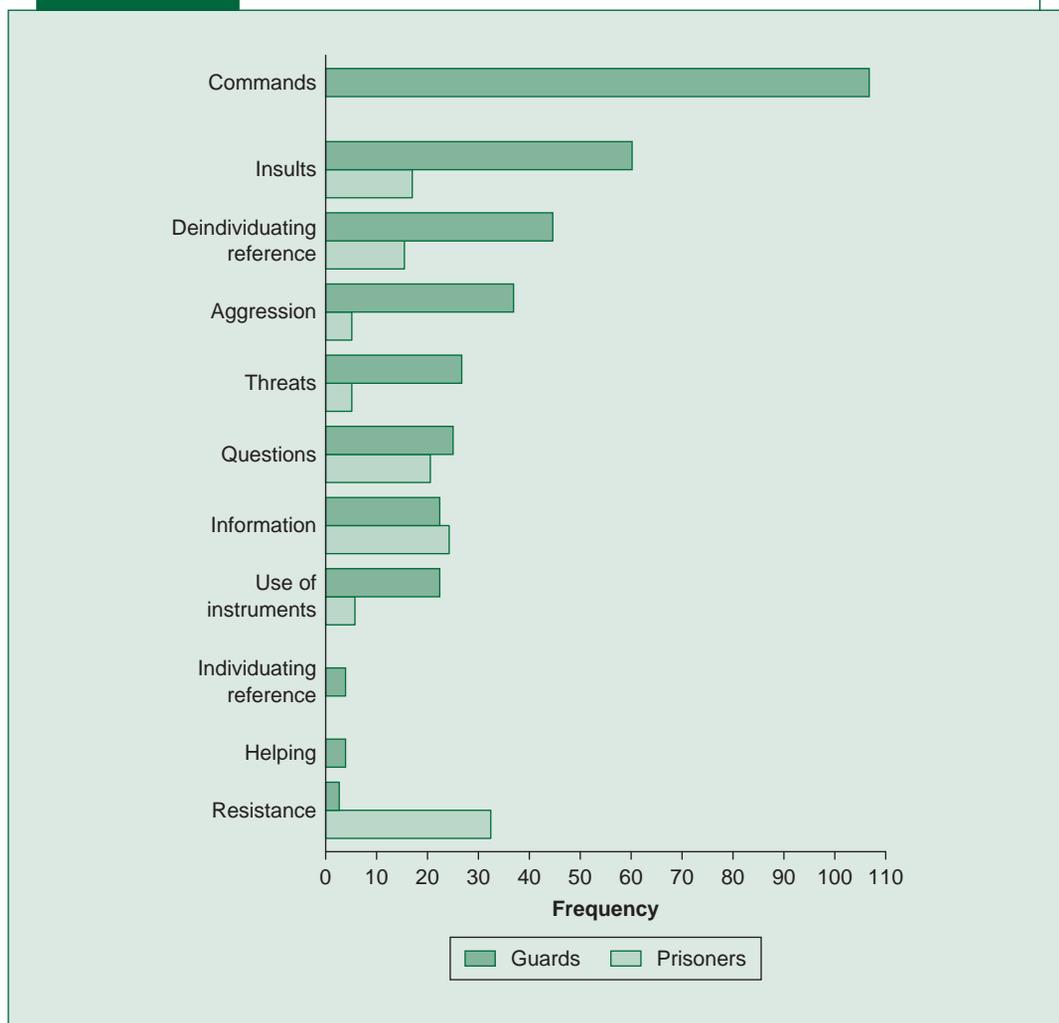
What about possible harm to the subjects of the famous prison simulation study at Stanford University (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo 1973)? The study was designed to investigate the impact of social position on behavior—specifically, the impact of being either a guard or a prisoner in a prison, a “total institution.” The researchers selected apparently stable and mature young male volunteers and asked them to sign a contract to work for 2 weeks as a guard or a prisoner in a simulated prison. Within the first 2 days after the prisoners were incarcerated by the “guards”

## 78 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

in a makeshift basement prison, the prisoners began to be passive and disorganized, while the guards became “sadistic”—verbally and physically aggressive (Exhibit 3.7). 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 the subjects.

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

**EXHIBIT 3.7** Chart of Guard and Prisoner Behavior



Would you ban such experiments because of the potential for harm to subjects? Does the fact that Zimbardo's and Milgram's experiments seemed to yield significant insights into the effect of a social situation on human behavior—insights that could be used to improve prisons or perhaps lessen the likelihood of another holocaust—make any difference (Reynolds 1979:133–139)? Do you believe that this benefit outweighs the foreseeable risks?

Well-intentioned researchers may also fail to foresee all the potential problems. Milgram (1974:27–31) reported that he and his colleagues were surprised by the subjects' willingness to carry out such severe shocks. In **Zimbardo's prison simulation study**, all the participants signed consent forms, but how could they have been fully informed in advance? The researchers themselves did not realize that the study participants would experience so much stress so quickly, that some prisoners would have to be released for severe negative reactions within the first few days, or that even those who were not severely stressed would soon be begging to be released from the mock prison. If this risk was not foreseeable, was it acceptable for the researchers to presume in advance that the benefits would outweigh the risks? And are you concerned, like Arthur Miller (1986:138), that real harm “could result from *not doing* research on destructive obedience” and other troubling human behaviors?

### Obtain Informed Consent

The requirement of informed consent is also more difficult to define than it first appears. To be informed, consent must be given by the persons who are competent to consent, have consented voluntarily, are fully informed about the research, and have comprehended what they have been told (Reynolds 1979). Yet you probably realize, like Diana Baumrind (1985), 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” (p. 165).

Obtaining informed consent creates additional challenges for researchers. The researcher's actions and body language should help convey his verbal assurance that consent is voluntary. The language of the consent form must be clear and understandable to the research participants and yet sufficiently long and detailed to explain what will actually happen in the research. Examples A (Exhibit 3.8) and B (Exhibit 3.9) illustrate two different approaches to these tradeoffs.

Consent form A was approved by my university IRB for a mailed survey about substance abuse among undergraduate students. It is brief and to the point.

Consent form B reflects the requirements of an academic hospital's IRB (I have only included a portion of the six-page form). 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 interview study such as mine. You can probably imagine that the requirement that prospective participants sign such lengthy consent forms can reduce their willingness to participate in research and perhaps influence their responses if they do agree to participate (Larson 1993:114).

As in Milgram's study, experimental researchers whose research design requires some type of subject deception try to get around this problem by withholding some information before the experiment begins but then debriefing subjects at the end. In the debriefing, the researcher explains to the subject what happened in the experiment and why and responds to their questions.

## 80 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

**EXHIBIT 3.8** Consent Form A**University of Massachusetts at Boston****Department of Sociology****(617) 287-6250**

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

A carefully designed debriefing procedure can help the research participants learn from the experimental research and grapple constructively with feelings elicited by the realization that they were deceived (Sieber 1992:39–41). However, even though debriefing can be viewed as a substitute, in some cases, for securing fully informed consent prior to the experiment, debriefed subjects who disclose the nature of the experiment to other participants can contaminate subsequent results (Adair, Dushenko, & Lindsay 1985). Unfortunately, if the debriefing process is delayed, the ability to lessen any harm resulting from the deception is also reduced.

For a study of the social background of men who engage in homosexual behavior in public facilities, Laud Humphreys (1970) decided that truly informed consent would be impossible to obtain. Instead, he first 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 **Tearoom Trade**, his book on this research, Humphreys concluded that the men who engaged in what were 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

**EXHIBIT 3.9** 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>

*(Continued)*

## 82 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

(Continued)

**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 non-rural 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: 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

**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

Page 6 of 6

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

## 84 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

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 normalize conceptions of homosexuality (Miller 1986:135).

If you were to serve on your university's IRB, would you allow this research to be conducted? Can students who are asked to participate in research by their professor be considered to be able to give informed consent? Do you consider "informed consent" to be meaningful if the true purpose or nature of an experimental manipulation is not revealed?

The process and even possibility of obtaining informed consent must take into account the capacity of prospective participants to give informed consent. Children cannot legally give consent to participate in research; instead, they must in most circumstances be given the opportunity to give or withhold their *assent* to participate in research, usually by a verbal response to an explanation of the research. In addition, a child's legal guardian must give written informed consent to have the child participate in research (Sieber 1992). There are also special protections for other populations that are likely to be vulnerable to coercion—prisoners, pregnant women, mentally disabled persons, and educationally or economically disadvantaged persons. Would you allow research on prisoners, whose ability to give "informed consent" can be questioned? What special protections do you think would be appropriate?

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

Deception occurs when subjects are misled about research procedures to determine how they would react to the treatment if they were not research subjects. Deception is a critical component of many social psychology experiments, in part because of the difficulty of simulating real-world stresses and dilemmas in a laboratory setting. The goal is to get subjects "to accept as true what is false or to give a false impression" (1997:4). In Milgram's (1964) experiment, for example, deception seemed necessary because the subjects could not be permitted to administer real electric shocks to the "stooge," yet it would not have made sense to order the subjects to do something that they didn't find to be so troubling. Milgram (1992:187–188) insisted that the deception was absolutely essential. The results of many other social psychological experiments would be worthless if subjects understood what was really happening to them while the experiment was in progress. The real question: Is this sufficient justification to allow the use of deception?

Gary Marshall and Philip Zimbardo (1979:971–972) sought to determine the physiological basis of emotion by injecting student volunteers with adrenaline, so that their heart rate and sweating would increase, and then placing them in a room with a student "stooge" who acted silly. But the students were told that they were being injected with a vitamin supplement to test its effect on visual acuity (Korn 1997:2–3). Piliavin and Piliavin (1972:355–356) staged fake seizures on subway trains to study helpfulness (Korn 1997:3–4). Would you vote to allow such deceptive practices in research if you were a member of your university's IRB? What about less dramatic instances of deception in laboratory experiments with students like yourself?

Do you believe that deception itself is the 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. I think it’s fair to say that even in the 1950s, reading a list of potentially embarrassing words in a laboratory setting and listening to a taped discussion are unlikely to increase the risks to which students are 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 (1959) explained the true nature of the experiment to subjects after the experiment. The subjects did not seem perturbed: “None of the Ss [subjects] 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” (p. 179).

Are you satisfied that this procedure caused no harm? Do you react differently to the **debriefing** by Aronson and Mills than you did to Milgram’s debriefing? 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 social scientists and IRBs, even today.

What scientific or educational or applied “value” would make deception justifiable, even if there is some potential for harm? Who determines whether a nondeceptive intervention is “equally effective”? (Miller 1986:103). Diana Baumrind suggested that personal “introspection” would have been sufficient to test Milgram’s hypothesis and has argued subsequently that intentional deception in research violates the ethical principles of self-determination, protection of others, and maintenance of trust between people, and so can never be justified (Baumrind 1985:167). How much risk, discomfort, or unpleasantness might be seen as affecting willingness to participate? When should a postexperimental “attempt to correct any misconception” due to deception be deemed sufficient?

Can you see why an IRB, representing a range of perspectives, is an important tool for making reasonable, ethical research decisions when confronted with such ambiguity? Exhibit 3.10 shows a portion of the complex flow chart developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to help researchers decide what type of review will be needed for their research plans. Any research involving deception requires formal human subjects’ review.

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

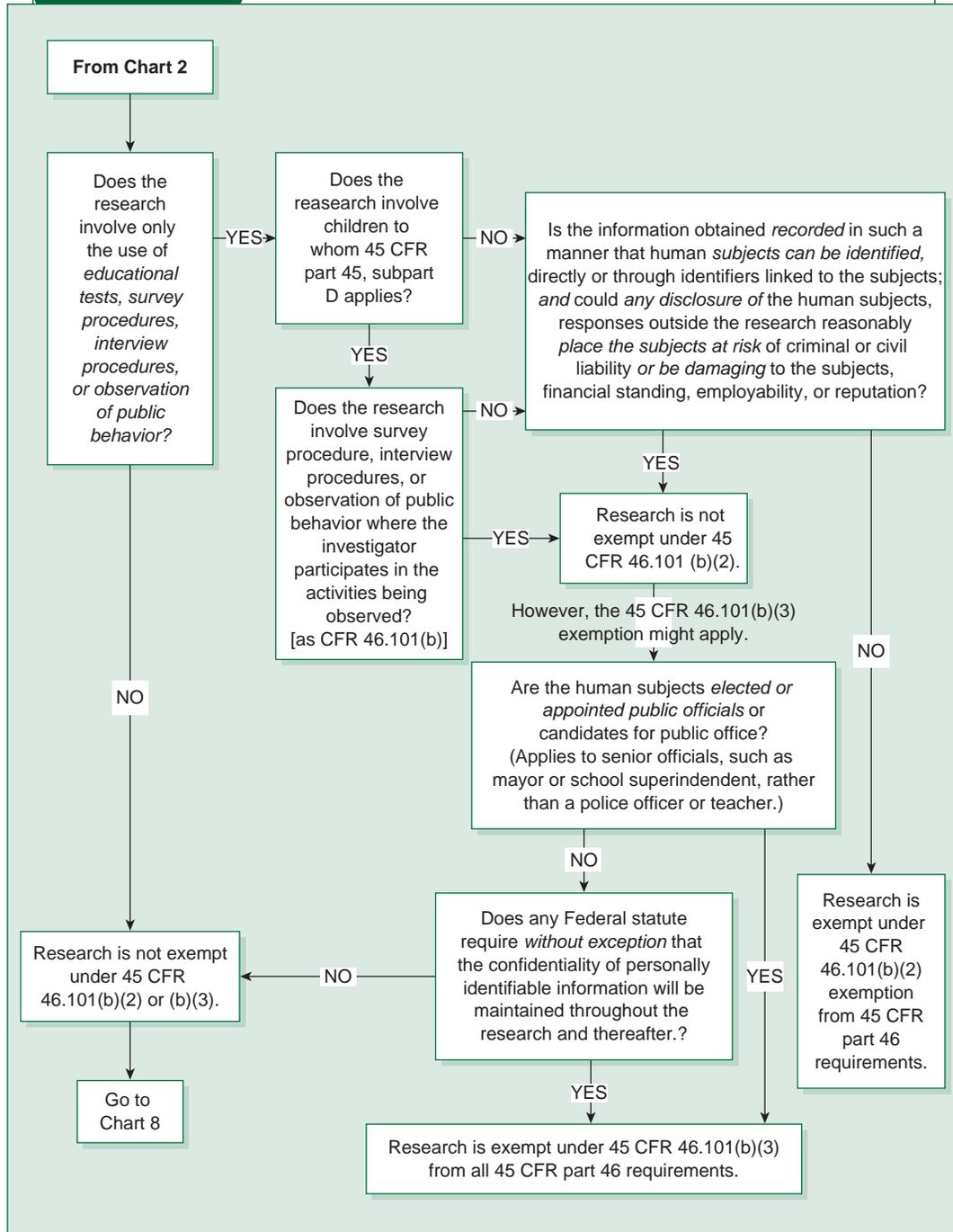
### Maintain Privacy and Confidentiality

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

86 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

**EXHIBIT 3.10**

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Human Subjects Decision Flow Chart 4: for Tests, Surveys, Interviews, Public Behavior Observation**



There is one exception to some of these constraints: 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, such as crime, substance abuse, sexual activity, or genetic information, can request such a certificate. Suspicions of child abuse or neglect must still be reported, and in some states researchers may still be required to report such crimes as elder abuse (Arwood & Panicker 2007).

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) passed by Congress in 1996 created much more stringent regulations for the protection of health care data. 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.” 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).

### The Uses of Research

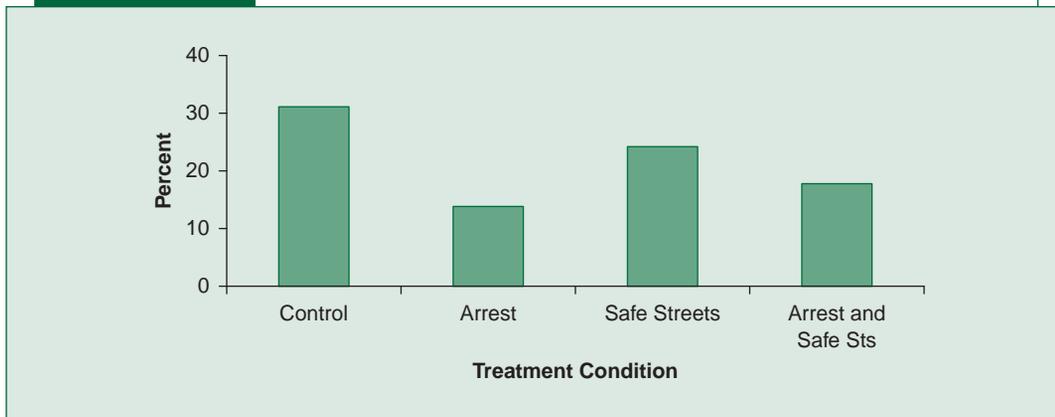
Scientists must also consider the uses to which their research is put. Although many scientists believe that personal values should be left outside the laboratory, some feel that it is proper—even necessary—for scientists to concern themselves with the way their research is used.

Stanley Milgram made it clear that he was concerned about the phenomenon of obedience precisely because of its implications for peoples’ welfare. As you have already learned, his first article (Milgram 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 (Milgram 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 social scientist, Milgram (1974) 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” (p. xi).

Yet it is impossible to ignore the very practical implications of Milgram’s investigations, which Milgram took pains to emphasize. 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, increasing the contact between the subject and the victim).

The evaluation research by Lawrence Sherman and Richard Berk (1984) on the police response to domestic violence provides an interesting cautionary tale about the uses of science. As you recall from Chapter 2, the results of this field experiment indicated that those who were arrested were less likely to subsequently commit violent acts against their partners. Sherman (1993) explicitly cautioned police departments not to adopt mandatory arrest policies based solely on the results of the Minneapolis experiment, but the results were publicized in the mass media and encouraged many jurisdictions to change their policies (Binder & Meeker 1993; Lempert 1989). Although we now know that the original finding of

## 88 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

**EXHIBIT 3.11** Victim Reports of Violence Following Police Intervention

a deterrent effect of arrest did not hold up in many other cities where the experiment was repeated, Sherman (1992) later suggested that implementing mandatory arrest policies might have prevented some subsequent cases of spouse abuse (pp. 150–153). JoAnn Miller’s (2003) analysis of victims’ experiences and perceptions concerning their safety after the mandatory arrest experiment in Dade County, Florida, found that victims reported less violence if their abuser had been arrested (and/or assigned to a police-based counseling program called “Safe Streets”) (Exhibit 3.11). Should this Dade County finding be publicized in the popular press, so it could be used to improve police policies? What about the results of the other replication studies?

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 often anticipate such dilemmas in advance and resolve them when the contract for research is negotiated—or simply decline a particular research opportunity altogether. But often, such problems come up only after a report has been drafted, or the problems are ignored by a researcher who needs to have a job or needs to maintain particular personal relationships. 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.

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

## PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

Your investigations of the social world will be shaped in part by general assumptions about how the social world can best be investigated—by your social research philosophy. In this section, we will focus on two general alternative research philosophies and examine some of their implications for research methods. I will review research guidelines and objectives that are consistent with both philosophies and consider examples of how the research you have learned about in Chapters 1 and 2 illustrates how to achieve these objectives and conform to these guidelines. Throughout this section, you should consider how these philosophical issues relate to the ethical issues we have just reviewed. At the end of the section, I will point out some of these relationships.

### Positivism and Postpositivism

Researchers with a **positivist** philosophy believe that there is an objective reality that exists apart from the perceptions of those who observe it, and that the goal of science is to understand this reality better.

Whatever nature “really” is, we assume that it presents itself in precisely the same way to the same human observer standing at different points in time and space. . . . We assume that it also presents itself in precisely the same way across different human observers standing at the same point in time and space. (Wallace 1983:461)

This is the philosophy traditionally associated with natural science, with the expectation that there are universal laws of human behavior, and with the belief that scientists must be objective and unbiased to see reality clearly (Weber 1949:72). Positivists believe that a well-designed test of a specific prediction—for example, the prediction that social ties decrease among those who use the Internet more—can move us closer to understanding actual social processes.

**Postpositivism** is a philosophy of reality that is closely related to positivism. Postpositivists believe that there is an external, objective reality, but they are very sensitive to the complexity of this reality and to the limitations and biases of the scientists who study it (Guba & Lincoln 1994:109–111). For example, postpositivists may worry that researchers, who are heavy computer users themselves, will be biased in favor of finding positive social effects of computer use. As a result of concerns such as this, postpositivists do not think we can ever be sure that scientific methods allow us to perceive objective reality. Instead, they believe that the goal of science is to achieve **intersubjective agreement** among scientists about the nature of reality (Wallace 1983:461). We can be more confident in the community of social researchers than in any individual social scientist (Campbell & Russo 1999:144).

**Positivism** The belief, shared by most scientists, that there is a reality that exists quite apart from our own perception of it, that it can be understood through observation, and that it follows general laws.

**Postpositivism** The belief that there is an empirical reality, but that our understanding of it is limited by its complexity and by the biases and other limitations of researchers.

**Intersubjective agreement** An agreement by different observers on what is happening in the natural or social world.

## 90 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

The positivist and postpositivist philosophies consider value considerations to be beyond the scope of science: “An empirical science cannot tell anyone what he should do—but rather what he can do—and under certain circumstances—what he wishes to do” (Weber 1949:54). The idea is that developing valid knowledge about how society *is* organized, or how we live our lives, does not tell us how society *should* be organized or how we *should* live our lives. The determination of empirical facts should be a separate process from the evaluation of these facts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory (Weber 1949:11).

The idea is not to ignore value considerations, because they are viewed as a legitimate basis for selecting a research problem to investigate. In addition, many scientists also consider it acceptable to encourage government officials or private organizations to act on the basis of a study’s findings, after the research is over. During a research project, however, value considerations are to be held in abeyance. The scientist’s work is done when his or her research results are published or presented to other scientists.

### Positivist Research Guidelines

To achieve an accurate understanding of the social world, the researcher operating within the positivist tradition must adhere to some basic guidelines about how to conduct research.

1. *Test ideas against empirical reality without becoming too personally invested in a particular outcome.* This guideline requires a commitment to “testing,” as opposed to just reacting to events as they happen or looking for what we want to see (Kincaid 1996:51–54). Note how McPherson and his colleagues (2006) acknowledged the social importance of inadequate social ties but did not express personal feelings or make recommendations about that problem:

If core discussion networks represent an important social resource, Americans are still stratified on education and race. . . . Nonwhites still have smaller networks than whites. (p. 372)

2. *Plan and carry out investigations systematically.* Social researchers have little hope of conducting a careful test of their ideas if they do not think through in advance how they should go about the test and then proceed accordingly. But a systematic approach is not always easy. Here is an explanation of a portion of the systematic procedures used by McPherson et al. (2006):

The GSS is a face-to-face survey of the noninstitutionalized U.S. adult population. The 1985 and 2004 surveys used the same questions to generate the names of confidants and identical procedures to probe for additional discussion partners. Therefore, the survey responses represent a very close replication of the same questions and procedures at two points in time, representing the same underlying population in 1985 and 2004. (pp. 356–357)

3. *Document all procedures and disclose them publicly.* Social researchers should disclose the methods on which their conclusions are based so that others can evaluate for themselves the likely soundness of these conclusions. Such disclosure is a key feature of science. It is the community of researchers, reacting to each others’ work, that provides the best guarantee against purely self-interested conclusions (Kincaid 1996). In their

methodological section, McPherson and his colleagues (2006) documented the approach they used to measure social ties:

We use the same measures of network characteristics that Marsden (1987:123–4) used in his description of the structure of 1985 American interpersonal environments. Size is the number of names mentioned in response to the “name generator” question. (p. 357)

4. *Clarify assumptions.* No investigation is complete unto itself; whatever the researcher’s method, the research rests on some background assumptions. For example, Sherman and Berk (1984) identified in much research to determine whether arrest has a deterrent effect on assumption that potential law violators think rationally and calculate potential costs and benefits prior to committing crimes. By definition, research assumptions are not tested, so we do not know for sure whether they are correct. By taking the time to think about and disclose their assumptions, researchers provide important information for those who seek to evaluate research conclusions.
5. *Specify the meaning of all the terms.* Words often have multiple or unclear meanings. “Alienation,” “depression,” “cold,” “crowded,” and so on can mean different things to different people. In scientific research, all terms must be defined explicitly and used consistently. For example, McPherson et al. (2006) distinguished the concept of “important matters” in their question about social ties from other possible meanings of this concept:

While clarifying what the GSS question measures, we should also be clear about what it does not measure. Most obviously, it does not measure what people talk about in their relationships. (p. 356)

6. *Maintain a skeptical stance toward current knowledge.* The results of any particular investigation must be examined critically, although confidence about interpretations of the social or natural world increases after repeated investigations yield similar results. A general skepticism about current knowledge stimulates researchers to improve current research and expand the frontier of knowledge. Again, McPherson and his colleagues (2006) provide an example. In this next passage, they caution against a too literal interpretation of their findings:

We would be unwise to interpret the answers to this question too literally (e.g., assuming that a specific conversation about some publicly weighty matter had occurred in the past six months). (p. 356)

7. *Replicate research and build social theory.* No one study is definitive by itself. We can’t fully understand a single study’s results apart from the larger body of knowledge to which it is related, and we can’t place much confidence in these results until the study has been replicated. For example, Sherman and Berk (1984) needed to ensure that spouse abusers were assigned to be either arrested or not on a random basis rather than on the basis of the police officers’ personal preferences. They devised a systematic procedure using randomly sequenced report sheets in different colors, but then found that police officers sometimes deviated from this procedure due to their feelings about particular cases. Subsequently, in some replications of the study, the researchers ensured compliance with their research procedures by requiring police officers to call in to a central number to receive the experimentally determined treatment. You have also seen

## 92 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

in Chapter 2 how replications of the Sherman and Berk research in other cities led to a different theory about the conditions when deterrence didn't work.

8. *Search for regularities or patterns.* Positivist and postpositivist scientists assume that the natural world has some underlying order of relationships, so that unique events and individuals can be understood at least in part in terms of general principles (Grinnell 1992:27–29). You have seen in this chapter how Stanley Milgram and others repeated his basic experiment on obedience in many settings in order to identify regularities in people's obedience to authority.

Real investigations by social scientists do not always include much attention to theory, specific definitions of all terms, and so forth. But it behooves any social researcher to study these guidelines and to consider the consequences of not following any with which they do not agree.

### Interpretivism and Constructivism

Qualitative research is often guided by a different, **interpretivist** philosophy. Interpretive social scientists believe that social reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand what meanings people give to reality, not to determine how reality

**Interpretivism** The belief that reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand what meanings people give to that reality. Max Weber termed the goal of interpretivist research *verstehen*, or “understanding.”

**Constructivist paradigm** A perspective that emphasizes how different stakeholders in social settings construct their beliefs.

works apart from these interpretations. In the words of Sally Lindsay and her colleagues (2007), “the researcher seeks an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants” (p. 101). This philosophy rejects the positivist belief that there is a concrete, objective reality that scientific methods help us understand (Lynch & Bogen 1997); instead, interpretivists believe that people construct an image of reality based on their own preferences and prejudices and their interactions with others and that this is as true of scientists as it is of everyone else in the social world. This means that we can never be sure that we have understood reality properly, that “objects and events are understood by different people differently, and those perceptions are the reality—or realities—that social science should focus on” (Rubin & Rubin 1995:35).

The **constructivist paradigm** extends interpretivist philosophy by emphasizing the importance of exploring how different stakeholders in a social setting construct their beliefs (Guba & Lincoln 1989:44–45). It gives particular attention to the different goals of researchers and other participants in a research setting and seeks to develop a consensus among participants about how to understand the focus of inquiry. From this standpoint, “Truth is a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time” (Schwandt 1994:128).

In the words of Lindsay et al. (2007),

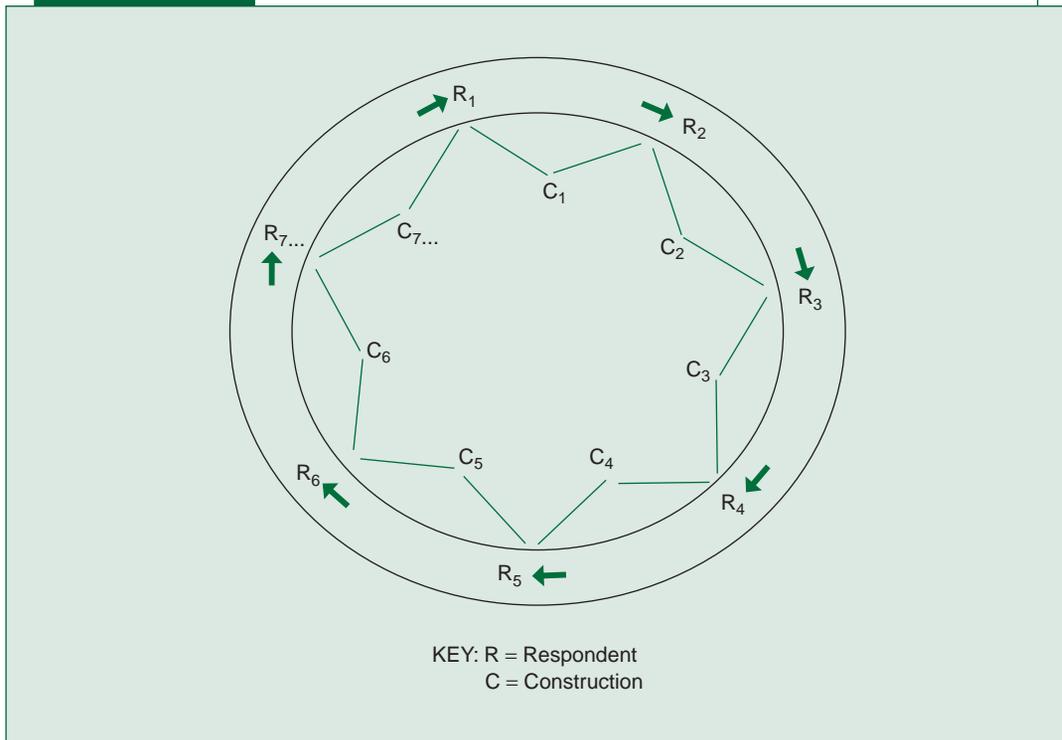
Here we provide a descriptive account of the impact that providing home Internet access may have had on the health and social behaviour of a small number of older deprived men with heart disease. The description is largely theirs and much of it is in retrospect. (pp. 99–100)

Constructivist inquiry uses an interactive research process, in which a researcher begins an evaluation in some social setting by identifying the different interest groups in that setting. The researcher goes on to learn what each group thinks, and then gradually tries to develop a shared perspective on the problem being evaluated (Guba & Lincoln 1989:42).

These steps are diagrammed as a circular process, called a **hermeneutic circle** (Exhibit 3.12). In this process, the researcher conducts an open-ended interview with the first respondent (R1) to learn about her thoughts and feelings on the subject of inquiry—her “construction” (C1). The researcher then asks this respondent to nominate a second respondent (R2), who feels very differently. The second respondent is then interviewed in the same way, but also is asked to comment on the themes raised by the previous respondent. The process continues until all major perspectives are represented, and then may be repeated again with the same set of respondents (Guba & Lincoln 1989:180–181).

**Hermeneutic circle** Represents the dialectical process in which the researcher obtains information from multiple stakeholders in a setting, refines his or her understanding of the setting, and then tests that understanding with successive respondents.

**EXHIBIT 3.12** The Hermeneutic Circle



## 94 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

**Interpretivist/Constructivist Research Guidelines**

Researchers guided by an interpretivist philosophy reject some of the positivist research guidelines. However, there are a wide variety of specific approaches that can be termed “interpretivist” and each has somewhat unique guidelines. For those working within the constructivist perspective, Guba and Lincoln (1989:42) suggest four key steps for researchers, each of which may be repeated many times in a given study:

1. Identify stakeholders and solicit their “claims, concerns, and issues.”
2. Introduce the claims, concerns, and issues of each stakeholder group to the other stakeholder groups and ask for their reactions.
3. Focus further information collection on claims, concerns, and issues about which there is disagreement among stakeholder groups.
4. Negotiate with stakeholder groups about the information collected and attempt to reach consensus on the issues about which there is disagreement.

Although Lindsay and her colleagues (2007) did not follow these guidelines exactly in their interpretivist research on Web-based social ties, their procedures did include a constructivist concern with eliciting feedback from their respondents:

The trustworthiness of findings was established by “peer debriefing” and “member checking.” Peer debriefing took place by discussing the interpretation of the data with each of the authors. Member checking took place by discussing the key themes with two of the men who participated in the focus group to ascertain whether the results reflected their experience. (p. 101)

**Feminist research** is a term used to refer to research done by feminists (Reinharz 1992:6–7) and to a perspective on research that can involve many different methods (Reinharz

**Feminist research** Research with a focus on women’s lives and often including an orientation to personal experience, subjective orientations, the researcher’s standpoint, and emotions.

1992:240). The feminist perspective on research includes the interpretivist and constructivist elements of concern with personal experience and subjective feelings and with the researcher’s position and standpoint (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2007:4–5). Feminist researchers Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy (2007:139) emphasize the importance of viewing the social world as complex and multilayered, of sensitivity to the impact of social differences—of being an “insider” or an “outsider,” and of

being concerned with the researcher’s position. African American feminist researcher Patricia Hill Collins (2008) suggests that researchers who are sensitive to their “outside” role within a social situation may have unique advantages:

Outsiders within occupy a special place—they become different people and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see. (p. 317)

It is tempting to think of positivism as representing an opposing research philosophy to interpretivism and constructivism (and, some would say, feminist methods). Then it seems that we should choose the one philosophy that seems closest to our own preferences and condemn the other as “unscientific,” “uncaring,” or perhaps just “unrealistic.” But there are good reasons to prefer a research philosophy that integrates some of the differences between these philosophies (Smith 1991). Researchers influenced by a positivist philosophy should be careful to consider how their research approaches and interpretations are shaped by their own social background—just as we are cautioned to do by interpretivist researchers. We also need to be sensitive to the insights that can be provided by other stakeholders in the settings we investigate. Researchers influenced more by an interpretivist philosophy should be careful to ensure that they use rigorous procedures to check the trustworthiness of their interpretations of data (Riessman 2008:185–199). If we are not willing to “ask hard questions” about our projects and the evidence we collect, we are not ready to investigate the social world (Riessman 2008:200).

In research articles published in sociology journals, C. David Gartrell and John W. Gartrell (2002) found that positivism continues to be the dominant perspective in the United States, but it has become much less common in British sociology journals.

Ethics are important no matter which research philosophy guides a researcher. However, a researcher’s approach to ethics tends to vary with his or her preferred philosophy. From a positivist standpoint, the researcher is “in charge” and the research participants tend to be viewed as “subjects” who the responsible researcher must protect from harm. From a constructivist standpoint, the research participants are more likely to be viewed as “people like us” with whom the researcher collaborates in an investigation and must treat as the researcher himself or herself would want to be treated.

## CONCLUSIONS

The extent to which ethical issues are a problem for researchers and their subjects varies dramatically with the type of research design. Survey research, in particular, creates few ethical problems. 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. Presumably, they would have felt differently if they had been treated unethically (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 1979; Sjoberg 1967).

The evaluation of ethical issues in a research project should be based on a realistic assessment of the overall potential for harm and benefit to research subjects rather than an apparent inconsistency between any particular aspect of a research plan and a specific ethical guideline. For example, full disclosure of “what is really going on” in an experimental study is unnecessary if subjects are unlikely to be harmed. Nevertheless, researchers should make every effort to foresee all possible risks and to weigh the possible benefits of the research against these risks. They should consult with individuals with different perspectives to

## 96 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

develop a realistic risk-benefit assessment, and they should try to maximize the benefits to, as well as minimize the risks for, subjects of the research (Sieber 1992:75–108).

Ultimately, 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 we leave you with the instruction to review the human subjects guidelines of the ASA or other professional association in your field, consult your university's procedures for the conduct of research with human subjects and then proceed accordingly.

You can now also understand why the debate continues between positivist and interpretivist philosophies, why researchers should think about the philosophy that guides their research, and how research can sometimes be improved by drawing on insights from both philosophies (Turner 1980:99).

### KEY TERMS

American Sociological Association, Code of Ethics	Intersubjective agreement
Belmont Report	Justice
Beneficence	Milgram's obedience experiments
Certificate of Confidentiality	Nuremberg War Crime Trials
Constructivist paradigm	Office for Protection From Research Risks, National Institutes of Health
Debriefing	Positivism
Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects	Postpositivism
Feminist research	Respect for persons
Hermeneutic circle	Tearoom Trade
Interpretivism	Tuskegee syphilis study
	Zimbardo's prison simulation study

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments led to intensive debate about the extent to which deception could be tolerated in social science 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 a Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. This policy requires that every institution seeking federal funding for biomedical or behavioral research on human subjects have an institutional review board to exercise oversight.
- The ASA's 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 reduce the risk of harm due to the use of deception in the experiment.
- Positivism and postpositivism are research philosophies that emphasize the goal of understanding the real world; these philosophies guide most quantitative researchers. Interpretivism is a research philosophy that emphasizes an understanding of the meaning people attach to their experiences; it guides many qualitative researchers.
- The constructivist paradigm reflects an interpretivist philosophy. It emphasizes the importance of exploring and representing the ways in which different stakeholders in a social setting construct their beliefs. Constructivists interact with research subjects to develop a shared perspective on the issue being studied.
- Feminist researchers often emphasize interpretivist and constructivist perspectives in research and urge a concern with underprivileged groups.

### STUDENT STUDY SITE

To assist you in completing the Web exercises, please access the study site at [www.pineforge.com/isw6](http://www.pineforge.com/isw6) where you will find the Web exercises with accompanying links. You'll find other useful study materials such as 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.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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. How do you evaluate the current ASA ethical code? Is it too strict or too lenient, or just about right? Are the enforcement provisions adequate? What provisions could be strengthened?
3. Why does unethical research occur? Is it inherent in science? Does it reflect "human nature"? What makes ethical research more or less likely?
4. Does debriefing solve the problem of subject deception? How much must researchers reveal after the experiment is over as well as before it begins?
5. What policy would you recommend that researchers such as Sherman and Berk (1984) follow in reporting the results of their research? Should social scientists try to correct misinformation in the popular press about their research or should they just focus on what is published in academic journals? Should researchers speak to audiences like police conventions in order to influence policies related to their research results?

### PRACTICE EXERCISES

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

## 98 INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

research on human subjects, as well as for the authors' apparent honesty, openness, and consideration of social consequences. Be generally negative but not unreasonable in your criticisms. 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 five 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 the class.

2. Investigate the standards and operations of your university's IRB. Interview one IRB member and one researcher whose research has been reviewed by the IRB (after receiving the appropriate permissions!). How well do typical IRB meetings work to identify the ethical issues in proposed research? Do researchers feel that their proposals are treated fairly? Why or why not?
3. Researchers should consider their research philosophy as well as their theoretical stance prior to designing a research project. The "Theories and Philosophies" lesson on the text's study site will help you think about the options.  
To use these lessons, choose one of the four "Theories and Philosophies" 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 [www.pineforge.com/isw6/learning.htm](http://www.pineforge.com/isw6/learning.htm), 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?

### WEB EXERCISES

1. The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) offers an extensive online training course in the basics of human subjects protections issues. Go 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 their Web site, [www.hhs.gov/ohrp](http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp), and write a short report about them.
3. Read the entire ASA Ethics Code at the Web site of the ASA Ethics Office, [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). Discuss the difference between the aspirational standards and the enforceable standards.
4. There are many interesting Web sites that discuss philosophy of science issues. Read the summaries of positivism and interpretivism at [www.misq.org/archivist/vol/no28/issue1/EdCommentsV28N1.pdf](http://www.misq.org/archivist/vol/no28/issue1/EdCommentsV28N1.pdf). What do these summaries add to your understanding of these philosophical alternatives?

### DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Now it's time to consider the potential ethical issues in your proposed study and the research philosophy that will guide your research. The following exercises involve very critical "Decisions in Research" (Exhibit 2.12, #6):

Chapter 3 ♦ *Research Ethics and Philosophies* 99

1. List the elements in your research plans 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 ASA standard.
3. Draft a consent form to be administered to your subjects when they enroll in your research. Use underlining and marginal notes to indicate where each standard for informed consent statements is met.
4. Do you find yourself more attracted to the positivist/postpositivist philosophy or to an interpretivist or constructivist or feminist philosophy? Why?
5. List the research guidelines that are consistent with the research philosophy you will adopt and suggest steps you will take to ensure adherence to each guideline.