

Chapter 4 Research Ethics

Note: as you read this lecture, it's a good idea to also look at the concept map for the chapter. Remember that you can click of different parts of the concept map to move upward or downward. Here is the link:

http://www.southalabama.edu/coe/bset/johnson/dr_johnson/clickmaps/ch4/fr_ch4.htm

What Are Research Ethics?

Ethics is the division in the field of philosophy that deals with values and morals. It is a topic that people may disagree on because it is based on people's personal value systems. What one person or group considers to be good or right might be considered bad or wrong by another person or group. In this chapter, we define *ethics* as the principles and guidelines that help us to uphold the things we value.

There are three major approaches to ethics that are discussed in the chapter.

1. Deontological Approach - This approach states that we should identify and use a Universal code when making ethical decisions. An action is either ethical or not ethical, without exception.
2. Ethical skepticism - This viewpoint states that concrete and inviolate ethical or moral standards cannot be formulated. In this view, ethical standards are not universal but are relative to one's particular culture, time, and even individual.
3. Utilitarianism - This is a very practical viewpoint, stating that decisions about the ethics should be based on an examination and comparison of the costs and benefits that may arise from an action. Note that the utilitarian approach is used by most people in academia (such as Institutional Review Boards) when making decisions about research studies.

Ethical Concerns

There are three primary areas of ethical concern for researchers:

1. **The relationship between society and science.**
 - Should researchers study what is considered important in society at a given time?
 - Should the federal government and other funding agencies use grants to affect the areas researched in a society?
 - Should researchers ignore societal concerns?
2. **Professional issues.**
 - The primary ethical concern here is fraudulent activity (fabrication or alteration of results) by scientists. Obviously, cheating or lying are never defensible.
 - *Duplicate publication* (publishing the same data and results in more than one journal or other publication) should be avoided.

- *Partial publication* (publishing several articles from the data collected in one study). This is allowable as long as the different publications involve different research questions and different data, and as long as it facilitates scientific communication. Otherwise, it should be avoided.

3. Treatment of Research Participants

- This is probably the most fundamental ethical issue in the field of empirical research.
- It is essential that one insures that research participants are not harmed physically or psychologically during the conduct of research.
- In the next section, we will go into the issue of treatment of research participants in depth.

Ethical Guidelines for Research with Humans

One set of guidelines specifically developed to guide research conducted by educational researchers is the AERA Guidelines. The AERA is the largest professional association in the field of education, and is also known as the American Educational Research Association. Here is the link to the American Educational Research Association's Code of Ethics: <http://www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.htm>

Here are some of the most important issues discussed in the chapter (and in the AERA Guidelines).

1. **Informed Consent.** Potential research participants must be provided with information that enables them to make an informed decision as to whether they want to participate in the research study.
 - An actual consent form is shown in Exhibit 4.3.
 - Here (shown in Table 4.1) is the information that you (the researcher) must put in a consent form so that potential participants are able to provide informed consent.

■ **TABLE 4.1** Information to Include in a Consent Form

Purpose of the research along with a description of the procedures to be followed and the length of time it will take the participant to complete the study

A description of any physical or psychological risks or discomforts the participant may encounter

A description of any benefits the participant or others may expect from the research

A description of any alternative procedure or treatment that might be advantageous to the participant

A statement of the extent to which the results will be kept confidential

Names of people the participant may contact with questions about the study or the research participant's rights

A statement indicating that participation is voluntary and the participant can withdraw and refuse to participate at any time with no penalty

A statement of the amount and schedule of payment if participants are to be paid for participation

The information should be written at an eighth-grade reading level; in cases targeting specific populations, a sixth-grade reading level might be appropriate

For additional tips on preparation of the consent form, go to <http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/humansubjects/guidance/ictips.htm>.

2. Informed Consent with Minors as Research Participants.

- Informed consent must be obtained from parents or guardians of minors.
- Also, assent must be obtained from minors who are old enough or have enough intellectual capacity to say they are willing to participate. *Assent* means the minor agrees to participate after being informed of all the features of the study that could affect the participant's willingness to participate.

3. Passive versus Active Consent

So far we have only talked about *active consent* (i.e., when consent is provided by the potential participant signing the consent form). Active consent is usually the preferred form of consent.

- *Passive consent* is the process whereby consent is given by not returning the consent form. An example is shown in Exhibit 4.5. Here is the key passage in the passive consent form: "Participation in this study is completely voluntary. All students in the class will take the test. If you do **not** wish for your child to be in this study, please fill out the form at the bottom of this letter and return it to me. Also, please tell your child to hand in a blank test sheet when the class is given the mathematics test so that your child will not be included in the study."

4. Deception

Deception is present when the researcher provides misleading information or when the researcher withholds information from participants about the nature and/or purpose of the study. Deception is allowable when the benefits outweigh the costs. However, the researcher is ethically obligated not to use any more deception than is needed to conduct a valid study.

- If deception is used, debriefing should be used. *Debriefing* is a poststudy interview in which all aspects of the study are revealed, any reasons for deception are explained, and any questions the participant has about the study are answered.
- Debriefing has two goals:
 1. *Dehoaxing* — informing study participants about deception that was used and the reasons for its use.
 2. *Desensitizing* — helping study participants deal with and eliminate any stress or other undesirable feelings that the study might have created.

5. Freedom to Withdraw

Participants must be informed that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

- If you have a power relationship with the participants (e.g., if you are their teacher or employer) you must be extra careful to make sure that they really do feel free to withdraw.

6. Protection from Mental and Physical Harm

This is the most fundamental ethical issue confronting the researcher. Fortunately, much educational research poses minimal risk to participants (as compared, for example, to medical research).

7. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality is a basic requirement in all studies. It means that the researcher agrees not to reveal the identity of the participant to anyone other than the researcher and his or her staff.

A stronger and even better condition (if it can be met) is called anonymity. *Anonymity* means that the identity of the participant is not known by anyone in the study, including the researcher. An example would be where the researcher has a large group of people fill out a questionnaire but NOT write their names on it. In this way, the researcher ends up with data, but no names.

Institutional Review Board

The *IRB* is a committee consisting of professionals and lay people who review research proposals to insure that the researcher adheres to federal and local ethical standards in the conduct of the research. Virtually every university in the U.S. has an IRB.

- Researchers must submit a *Research Protocol* to the IRB for review. A full example of a research protocol submitted to the IRB is shown in Exhibit 4.6.

- Three of the most important categories of review are *exempt studies* (i.e., studies involving no risk to participants and not requiring full IRB review), *expedited review* (i.e., the process by which a study is rapidly reviewed by fewer members than constitute the full IRB board), and *full board review* (i.e., review by all members of the IRB).
- Although many educational studies are fall into the exempt category, it is essential that you understand that it is the IRB staff and not the researcher that makes the decision as to whether a research protocol is exempt. The IRB will provide the formal documentation of this status for your study.

For more information than is provided in the text about IRB regulations, go here:

<http://ori.dhhs.gov/>

Also, for your convenience, we have included in Table 4.3 the exempt categories used by the IRB.