

## COLORADO COLLEGE PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL RESEARCH

The issues in making proposed research ethical are two-fold:

- 1) Will participants be adequately **informed** about the research to meaningfully **consent** to participate in it?
- 2) Will participants be **harmed** in unanticipated ways by their participation in the research?

### INFORMED CONSENT

- *The participant's competence to consent:* participants must be adults (18 or older in the US), and must have the freedom and the mental capacity to consent or decline to participate in the research. Minors, the mentally ill, and the developmentally disabled are thought unable to meaningfully consent. Students in a faculty member's class, prisoners, ill people who cannot afford medications or others in a power situation where they are disempowered may feel coerced to participate in research.
- *Who the researcher is and who is sponsoring the research:* The researcher must disclose his or her name and contact information and must provide full disclosure about who is sponsoring the research; if the researcher believes disclosure of sponsorship will bias the participant's responses, the sponsors may be identified at the end of the research rather than at the beginning.
- *What the research investigates:* The researcher need not reveal the specific hypothesis, but must give enough information that the participant can understand what the research is about.
- *What participation entails:* participants must be informed about the activities they will be asked to complete as well as the expected time commitment.
- *What harms might result from participation:* participants may consent to participate in potentially harmful research, but they must be fully informed of any potential harm—whether these are psychological from answering questions about a distressing experience or physical, e.g., muscle strain from an exercise program.
- *What guarantee of confidentiality exists:* The researcher's intent in terms of the use of participants' names and the conditions under which the researcher would reveal participants' names, must be clear to participants. Especially if the research involves illegal activities or politically controversial participant matter, the researcher must be clear with participants about the degree of confidentiality that is being promised. (See confidentiality bullet under "harms" for ways to avoid violations of confidentiality.)
- *What will happen to the data after the research is completed:* After this research is completed, will the data be destroyed, or stored for future use? If stored for future use, who will have access to the data? If others will have access to the data, how will the original researcher insure confidentiality?

HARM TO PARTICIPANTS: participants should not be harmed by their participation in our research. If harm is anticipated for some participants, participants must be fully informed about the research and must consent to participate nonetheless. If participants are not fully informed about the nature of the research or their participation in it, the researcher must take special care to avoid any harm to the participants. Researchers are obligated to make a compelling argument that the *potential benefits or goods* resulting from a given piece of research *outweigh* the *potential harms or risks* to participants or participant populations in order to justify carrying out the research, in this case both to professors and to the IRB.

- *Frivolous use of time*: participants provide a service to researchers by donating their time. Researchers should be respectful of participants' time by utilizing the most effective and efficient data collection instruments possible. Researchers should not include instruments because the findings will be "interesting"—every question asked, every activity observed, every manipulation completed should be used in the service of a specific research question. Don't waste participants' time on a fishing expedition.
- *Invasion of privacy*: Anything humans can do or conceive is legitimate fodder for the research enterprise. People may consent to an invasion of their privacy, but they must be competent adults, and they must know in advance that the research will entail an invasion of privacy. Researchers often inform participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time or that they may refuse to answer any question or perform any activity.
- *Distressing thoughts*: To the extent possible researchers should warn potential participants if they think the participant matter of the research will cause distressing thoughts, whether those thoughts are memories of prior traumatic events or confrontations with weaknesses and foibles, immoralities or crimes in one's behavior. Participants should not leave the research situation feeling incompetent, inferior, or bad about themselves. The ethical obligation is to warn potential participants if the researcher anticipates distressing thoughts, and to debrief the participants following the research to assure that there are no negative effects. Especially if the research addresses past traumas, researchers often provide participants with a list of community resources to deal with the trauma.
- *Violation of confidentiality*: Researchers must take every precaution to assure that promised confidentiality is not violated; common ways of doing so include:
  - Giving participants pseudonyms or using initials or not collecting identifying information in the first place.
  - Not leaving questionnaires, interview transcripts, or field notes with participant identifications sitting around on tables (or other public places) where other people might see them.
  - Changing details in the write-up in order to prevent readers from identifying participants; this is especially important when the research has involved a small, on-going group of people who know each other.
  - With sensitive interviews that will be tape-recorded or with participants who are hesitant to sign a consent form, the researcher may read the

- consent form into the tape recorder and the participant can verbally consent without revealing his or her name.
  - Labeling interview tapes so that it is clear they have interviews instead of music on them.
  - Storing field notes, transcripts or questionnaires that have been purged of identifying information separately from any identifying information (e.g., a day timer with appointment names and addresses).
  - Destroying identifying information as soon as possible.
- *Stigmatizing of a group in which the individual participant is a member:* Researchers may honor the confidentiality of individual participants and still cause a participant to face ridicule or embarrassment by reporting results that would stigmatize the group. This is especially problematic when small populations are involved (e.g., a given school, a given dorm, a given campus group). Great care should be taken to weigh potential benefits and harms when stigmatized groups are involved.
- *Physical harm:* Researchers are obligated to warn participants of any physical harm that might occur as a result of participation in the research. If participants might not appreciate that they could be at risk, the researcher should screen for risk factors. For example, if the research involves performance comparisons under the influence of two different food products or drinks, the researcher must ascertain whether a participant has any contra-indications that would put him or her at risk, e.g., diabetes, high blood pressure, and shortness of breath.
- *Illegal behavior:* Researchers have no legal guarantee of confidentiality in the matter of illegal behavior. If a researcher collects information about illegal activities, the police may subpoena the researcher's data. A researcher who refuses to comply with such a subpoena may face contempt of court and jail time. A researcher who anticipates that he or she may collect information about illegal activities should inform participants whether the researcher will or will not comply with subpoenas for identifying information.

The US Government started mandating reviews of research that it funds because of egregious examples of research in which researchers lost track of their responsibilities to treat their participants as fellow human beings. The most infamous example is *The Tuskegee Syphilis Study* in which African-American men with syphilis were not told about their disease or effective treatments for it in order to allow researchers to document the progression of the disease (click [here](#) for more details).

Social science research rarely has such serious physiological consequences (and may not be funded by the US government), and many social scientists complain that we are handicapped by a review process that was designed to supervise medical research. Nonetheless, there are numerous debates among social scientists about whether classical research projects have been ethical; most notably:

- *Milgrim studies on obedience to authority* in which researchers asked participants to give apparently lethal electric shocks to fellow participants. Issues: 1) participants not informed that the research investigated obedience and were

- deceived to think that the research focused on learning; 2) participants experienced psychological distress.
- *Stanford prison experiment* in which researchers assigned some participants to be prisoners and other participants to be guards. Issues: 1) Prisoners were dehumanized and experienced severe distress; 2) Guards experienced themselves as brutal; 3) Researchers got so caught up in the simulation that they allowed the research to go on for too long.
  - *Laud Humphreys' study on impersonal sex in public restrooms* in which Humphreys posed as a "watch queen" and observed men having impersonal sex in public bathrooms. Humphreys noted the men's license plate numbers, tracked down the men, and then interviewed them. Issues: 1) Men did not consent to have their sexual behavior observed; 2) Men were potentially at risk of exposure or incarceration due to Humphreys' collection of identifiable information; 3) Men were deceived about how they were selected for the interview study.
  - *Project Camelot* in which a group of US social scientists were prevented from doing comparative research on the causes of revolution. Issues: 1) The research was sponsored by the US Army, which sought information about how to control revolutions in Latin America; the social scientists did not problematize the presumed right of the US to intervene in the affairs of other countries; 2) Researchers thought the value of the information would outweigh the potential harms to citizens of other countries; 3) Project Camelot served to raise suspicions about any social science research in Latin America.

A danger in using too strict a guideline for what is ethical is that necessary research will not be doable. Craig Haney, in a reflection on the Stanford Prison Experiment, makes such a claim. To the extent that social scientists conduct research about institutions or individuals about which we are critical, inevitably our research will participant those institutions or individuals to harm. Haney writes:

Thus, in the name of protecting people, an attempt is made to preclude critical analysis of those environments which may be most harmful to them. But if social scientists cannot challenge the role of certain institutions, document their excesses and the nature of their harm and seek techniques by which individuals may begin to fight back, who can? (Craig Haney, "The Play's The Thing: Methodological Notes on Social Simulations," p.189 in M. Patricia Golden (ed.), *The Research Experience*, Itasca IL: F.E. Peacock Publishers, 1976)

Socially significant, scientifically rigorous, and entirely ethical research is difficult--if not impossible--to achieve. The goal of any researcher--and of the IRB that reviews research proposals--must be to achieve a balance between these goods.