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Ethics in Human Research: Where Does Privacy Begin?

Research Exercise: Borderline Ethics

Ethical Principles of Psychologists

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“Ethics? What is this, a course in philosophy?” you may be wondering. Since we won’t be implanting electrodes in helpless rabbits, imprisoning monkeys in laboratories, or training dolphins to carry underwater explosive devices, why should we be worried about ethics? Our research subjects will be college students or adults, mature and healthy human beings—what’s the concern here, anyway? These people can think for themselves, and besides, we’ll only be looking at their own behavior, not inflicting pain or suffering upon them.

It may surprise you to learn that ethical considerations will be a component of almost any study you and I devise. While it is unlikely that subjects will experience physical injury at our hands, the likelihood of our inflicting mental anguish or discomfort on participants in our studies is probably a good deal greater than you would imagine. You
may also be surprised to learn that serious ethical objections have been raised concerning many of our most famous studies in social psychology.

Maybe you know about the Milgram (1965) study in which participants were tricked into assuming the role of "teacher" and then were coerced by the experiment into administering increasing voltages of shock to a gray-haired man who had the misfortune of being chosen as the "learner." After being seduced by the situation, better than half the student teachers administered what they believed to be 450 volts of electricity, some fearing they had perhaps killed the learner when he failed to respond.

This type of experimental procedure, in which participants are deliberately misled or lied to in order to examine a social phenomenon, is known as a "deception study." Milgram's study would not have posed the dilemma between wishing to please an authority figure and wishing not to inflict harm on another human being had the "teachers" known that the shocks and cries of pain were bogus; thus, the rationale for deception. No one was actually harmed in this deception experiment—at least this is the assumption. Better to say no one was really shocked; but what of the emotional responses of the teachers?

This is an engaging study for professors to use in class. A skilled lecturer can have students in the palm of his hand as he describes the designated teacher's inability to say no to an authority figure who insists the experiment continue in the name of science, the cries of pain from the learner notwithstanding. The issue under investigation—obedience to authority—is enormously important in a democracy. We look at our own lives and see instances where we have knuckled under in less dramatic situations and, via this recollection, learn of "the power of the situation" from Milgram's work.

And, of course, everything seems to have worked out all right in the study. The learner didn't really have a heart attack; he was just an actor in on the deception, a "stooge," in our social psychology jargon. Participant "teachers" claimed they'd learned valuable lessons about themselves, and would be less likely to blindly obey authority in the future.

Are you familiar with the "prison" that Professor Philip Zimbardo (1973) set up in the basement of the Stanford University psychology building? If so, you'll remember that this experiment, where average college-age males role-played either guards or prisoners, had to be called off after only a few days, due to unexpectedly cruel behavior by the participants. Some guards humiliated, harassed, and physically punished the prisoners. Some of the mock prisoners showed emotional breakdowns. But, after the study was halted, everyone came together in a therapeutic group setting claiming they had learned about themselves and the power of institutions to warp the way we see the world.

Both the Milgram and Zimbardo studies have been questioned on ethical grounds. Granted, these studies are energizing as lecture material; granted, they teach us more about ourselves and the environmental determination of behavior than almost any other research I can think of. The point remains: are we, as researchers, justified in placing this much stress on human beings who fail to realize the upshot of their agreement to participate in research? Milgram and Zimbardo were groundbreakers; neither anticipated the extremes to which his subjects would go. We might justifiably excuse them of ethical malfeasance on the basis of ignorance. But consider this scenario: what if someone knew the likely consequences of such research and still pressed on because of the potential importance of such experimentation in understanding human behavior? Would such a researcher be guilty of a serious breach of ethics? Who should make this determination? On what basis?

These studies represent extremes. Hopefully, you will not create situations that inflict suffering on your subjects. But that's not my point. What I want you to address is very important. Consider carefully this question: Where do we draw the line between ethically acceptable research and that which is not? I have an exercise that should help you to do this.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS

Before we begin our exercise in ethics, consider the recently revised Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (1992a). Appendix C, in the back of this book, summarizes aspects of this code that I feel have special relevance for us. APA is also considering revisions of its more specific guidelines on ethical principles in the conduct of research with human participants (APA Monitor, December 1992b). Highlights from the current principles are included in Appendix C.

Note particularly those items dealing with human research, specifically the concepts of informed consent and debriefing. When human beings agree
to be subjects in an experiment, they have a right to know enough about the study in order to make a free and reasoned choice whether to participate. Following the collection of data, it is the researcher’s responsibility to fully divulge the purpose of the study, explain any deceptions utilized, and assure that subjects have not been unduly troubled by their participation.

**BORDERLINE ETHICS: A GROUP EXERCISE ON MORAL SENSITIVITY IN EXPERIMENTATION**

*Advance Preparation: Completing the Individual Work Sheet*

Before you begin this exercise, review the APA principles under Appendix C that apply to conducting research with human subjects. These will be your guidelines in this project. Realize that deception studies are widely used in order to investigate social psychology hypotheses, and that most deceptions are both necessary and relatively benign. Reflect on the position that some subject discomfort may be a worthwhile tradeoff for advancing our knowledge of human behavior. Weigh the following considerations as you embark on the creative part of this exercise, designing an experiment at the borderline of ethical acceptability.

- Adherence to APA principles
- Balancing subject welfare with the interests of science
- Your readings about social psychology research
- Personal life experiences that may relate to this issue

Your research team will be discussing hypothetical research—experiments that to the best of your knowledge have never been conducted, but could be. It is critical to the success of this project that you come to the group meeting prepared to present two such possible studies. You will make up these studies; they’re your own creation, so you have lots of leeway. Think them through carefully and be ready to describe the method by which this research might be conducted. Don’t worry much about theoretical background or detailed means of analyzing data. We are interested in what happens to the subjects in your hypothetical study. Hence, be prepared to describe all aspects of how each study is conducted, from beginning to end, concentrating on what happens to your subjects. You are free to consult your textbooks; better yet, use your imagination.

The zinger is this: the study must be at the gray area of ethical acceptability; it must be borderline in this respect, perhaps so much so that, ideally, you yourself are uncertain of whether it is ethical or not. Don’t whine and say, “I can’t do it; I can’t think of a study!” Let yourself go; this is a chance for you to exercise some of the creativity you will need as we design future experiments. Give yourself the freedom to create something a little bizarre or “off the wall.” Start with a general idea, write it down, and then begin to refine the procedure. You’re free to make up a hypothesis, location, independent variable manipulation, and specify how behavior will be measured. Just remember to keep the study plausible (someone could actually run such a study) and include some aspect that makes the study questionable on ethical grounds. Use the Individual Work Sheet at the end of this chapter to help you work out this hypothetical study.

Here’s an example. Suppose you are interested in the possibility of gender differences in good samaritanism; whether there are differences between males and females in their willingness to help animals in emergency situations. The issue of helping an injured animal is certainly an important topic. Knowledge of the factors influencing helping behavior in such situations might make it easier for local pet control operations to find homes for abandoned animals. I’d love to see this. My wife, Linda, has what we jokingly refer to as a Saint Francis complex; she took a vow as a young girl to always help an animal in need. We live off a gravel road that is a favorite place for city dwellers to drop off unwanted kittens. Every couple of months a new one wanders down the driveway to our house as though it had a map; as a consequence, we currently have ten cats ranging in age from 5 months to 17 years.

But how does one investigate gender differences in prosocial behavior toward animals, and how could an experiment in this area be unethical? Consider first some extremes. Let’s agree that we consider it unquestionably ethical to conduct a study in which we simply observe the frequency with which male and female students adopt homeless pets. I can’t imagine anyone thinking our observation of such behavior could be objectionable in any way.

Now let’s look at the other end of the scale. The following study may seem “gross,” but it’s neces-
ary to make my point. I’d guess most of us would agree that we would consider unethical a study that utilized a bleeding, live animal as a stimulus for helping behavior. It certainly would be possible, technically, to conduct a study that involved placing this poor, mutilated creature on a campus sidewalk and then observing reactions of male and female students as they encountered it. Technically possible, but ethically irresponsible. Hopefully, you’re revolted at the thought of such a study. Good.

The critical issue is this: Where is the gray area between these extremes of black and white? What studies might exemplify this ethical borderline between acceptable and unacceptable? What about a study that utilized a stuffed animal on which ketchup had been spread? A piece of fishing line could be tied to the stuffed animal and pulled by a confederate who hid behind a nearby statue, allowing the researcher to twitch the stuffed animal whenever a campus pedestrian approached. Would such a study be ethical?

No harm is done to an animal in this borderline example. The only harm might be the upset that some sensitive subjects would experience, thinking our ketchup-splattered toy was a real animal. But this is no worse than the Halloween pranks many of us played years ago that had no redeeming scientific value. So, is the study okay? Is it ethical? You tell me.

Research Team Size
This process works best with a group of six to eight students. Although the numbers are not critical, the idea is to get several hypothetical studies before the group for consideration. If you have less than six students in your group, each participant could report on two prepared studies. Use your best judgment; all studies under consideration should be well thought through by the presenters.

Hypothetical Studies of Ethical Ambiguity: Individual Narratives
Here’s the way the process works. Research team members, one at a time, present their studies to the group. The presenter carefully outlines all aspects of the study in a manner equivalent to the Method section of a psychology journal. This is a dispassionate description of the procedure with no, repeat no, indication of what it is in the procedure that causes the presenter to have ethical qualms about the study. By the way, you may think potential ethical objections are glaringly obvious; in fact, you will likely find this is not always the case. As you outline your procedure, a research team member may pose a question you had not considered previously. Examine this question in light of your experiment’s overall intent for a minute and then answer the question one way or the other, as best you can. Since these are hypothetical studies, we can always do some on-the-spot revision.

After the study is outlined, members of the research team are allowed to pose questions that deal only with clarification of the procedure. They may ask questions like: “Did the subjects volunteer for this experiment?” “Were the subjects debriefed, and shown that the injured animal was only a toy?” The content of these questions will reflect the studies you create, but questions should only make clear what happens, not whether it should happen.

Thus, research team members are not permitted to comment on ethical concerns that they might see in the research. Comments like the following are disallowed: “That’s sick!”, “I’d never run a study like that!”, “That’s a cool manipulation; I don’t think elementary school kids would be offended by that movie at all—they see lots worse on MTV,” etc.

To reiterate, team members must fully comprehend your procedure, what will go on in this hypothetical experiment; to this end they are permitted to ask questions of clarification. They are not yet allowed to express personal emotional reactions to the ethics of your proposed study. They should probably take notes on each study and record any objections for later reference. After all questions of clarification are addressed, the procedure is repeated until all team members have had the opportunity to present their borderline studies to the group. As a final step, the professor or a research team member might dispassionately summarize each study and write a brief title on the blackboard.

Independent Research Team Evaluations of Ethical Acceptability
Following the presentation of all studies, each member of the research team must complete the following evaluation on the research team evaluation sheet at the end of this chapter. Write a summary phrase identifying each borderline study, together with the initials of the student who proposed this experiment (e.g., “Recruits free zoo animals,” RJM).

1. Rank-order the studies in terms of how ethically acceptable you find each study to be, from most
ethical to least ethical; indicate this by a ranking of 1 = least objectionable through \( n \) (the number of studies presented) = most objectionable.

2. Reconsider each study independent of the others and make a final ultimately ethical/unethical decision. Attach an \( E \) (ethical) or \( U \) (unethical) to each ranking. In both cases, we acknowledge that there may exist serious concerns about the study; however, an \( E \) means that such a study, on balance, is ultimately acceptable on ethical grounds and should be permitted; an \( U \) indicates that ethical concerns are so severe that this study should not be permitted.

Many of you will think, "Gee, if only this were changed..." but that type of alteration is not yet permissible. The studies must rise or fall as they were initially presented.

**Group Comparison of Ratings and Discussion of Differences**

The professor, if present, or the first member of the research team to finish ranking and ratting the hypothetical studies should construct a matrix on the blackboard of the same form as the research team evaluation sheet at the end of this chapter. This matrix will list all proposed studies in a column to the left, with the names of research team members across the top. When all members of the team have ranked the studies and assigned designations of \( U \) or \( E \) to each, they will come to the blackboard as a group and complete the matrix. Be sure everyone has finished before any team member enters rankings within the matrix. Some people hate to take a stand, and would just love to alter their own rankings to conform with those of others in your group.

Copy those ranking on your research team evaluation sheet for (1) a permanent record of the group’s ethical responses to the suggested borderline studies, and/or (2) as an indicator for your professor of your team’s proposed experiments.

**Probing and Discussing Differences in Rankings**

Now comes the fascinating and unpredictable aspect of this exercise—the discussion of differences that emerge. Since I won’t be able to hear the borderline studies you propose or see the group’s evaluative rankings, I’ll address my comments to Table 3.1 and let you apply the same considerations to your results.

Let’s look first at a general evaluation of the proposed studies. In Table 3.1, the study that proposed planting health rumors and looking for over-reactions in people routinely but unnecessarily worried about their physical well-being (hypochondriacs) was judged as unethical by everyone except student C. Not surprisingly, the same study also received uniformly high rankings on the least ethical side of our rating scale. Conversely, the study advocating putting prisoners in cells of different sizes in order to determine an optimum living size was seen as ethical by everyone except B (and all rankings were on the ethical end of the scale). Examine the evaluations you have generated. Do you see this type of consistency in the ratings (known as interrater reliability)?

Look now for ethical stricture, the degree to which some team members are more or less ethically concerned. In Table 3.1, person C saw every study as ethically acceptable, while person B saw none of the studies as appropriate! Do you find a similar pattern in your results? How should such differences impact on a decision to conduct certain types of research?

Next, we come to the most revealing comparison; look for studies in which uniformity of consensus does not exist. The studies that proposed picketing at Christmas time and staging a mixed-sex fistfight in order to look at patterns of interven-

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**TABLE 3.1 Examples of Class Rankings and Ethical Evaluations: Former Borderline Ethics Experiments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Studies</th>
<th>Student Evaluators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimum prison cell size</td>
<td>1E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracing porno phone calls</td>
<td>4E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumors and hypochondriacs</td>
<td>5U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picketing stores at Christmas</td>
<td>2E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staged mixed-sex fistfight</td>
<td>6U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Blind&quot; solicitor for charity</td>
<td>3E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
by gender were both seen very differently by team members. Do your data uncover any

Finally, do the following:

1. Look for team members who have not discriminated among the studies, who see them as either all ethical or all unethical. Ask them why they reached these conclusions. What might be done, if anything, to tip their hands? For the least concerned student(s), where would they draw the line? For the most concerned, how could these studies be made acceptable, if at all?

2. For studies that received mixed reviews, address the question of why this is so. It may be that some class members have focused on one aspect of the study that others have failed to notice.

Implications for Student Research

A significant result of this exercise should be your sobering awareness that ethical considerations in research are not as black and white as we have been led to believe, and that adherence to a code is no guarantee that studies will be seen in the same way by different researchers. Yet, science must progress; while we don’t wish to give carte blanche acceptance to anything calling itself psychological research (and subject welfare be hanged), neither do we wish to have a few hand wringers deny the opportunity of others to conduct their studies.

Some colleges and universities have research review committees; mine does not. However, my class members and I constitute a type of review board in that all class studies are formally proposed and critiqued before being conducted. Usually we think of this process as a means to better experimentation, rather than an ethics review procedure, but it also serve the latter objective. Probably your professor will be more concerned about certain studies than the rest of you; I know this happens to me. Whether it’s because I’m older and slightly less given to risk taking, more of a humanitarian, or the person who is ultimately responsible, I’m unsure. I think there’s a lot of the last factor. If a student study misfires and subjects are upset or suffer in some fashion, I fear I will be held ultimately responsible. This thought upsets me, and I consequently go out of my way to try to avoid risks of this type as much as possible, consistent with our need to do good research. So if your prof seems a little uptight about your study on the effects of X-rated or NC-17-rated movies on aggression in college freshmen (as I was),

try to be understanding. You won’t have to explain it to the dean, to upset parents, and more important, to troubled, naive freshmen who were just looking for a bonus point in general psychology.

DECEPTION STUDIES AND THE USE OF CONFEDERATES

As I tried to imply at the beginning of this chapter, we professors may both misrepresent the field and falsely encourage a fun and games approach to the field of social psychology by our emphasis on deception research when we lecture (see Figure 3.1). It’s a “trip” to have the class mesmerized as they hear you speak knowledgeably of the zany, hula-hooping confederate who tries to get subjects to behave in a similarly crazy manner. Some of these subjects had previously been injected with epinephrine, mistakenly believing it to be a new vitamin supplement, Suproxin (Schachter and Singer, 1962)

THE FAR SIDE

By GARY LARSON

FIGURE 3.1 Deception Research Poses the Temptation of “Fun and Games” Manipulations

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and were in the process of labeling their reaction to the drug euphoria. Or maybe it's the bystander intervention studies, in which bookcases supposedly collapse on victims (Latané and Rodin, 1969), or a first-year college student suffers an epileptic fit (Latané and Darley, 1968), or researchers simulate a fire in a room adjoining subjects, which rapidly fills with ersatz smoke (Darley and Latané, 1968). These are all substantive and important studies in the history of social psychology. They should be discussed but not systematically selected because of their ability to excite students in class.

I must confess, I lecture on all these studies. My concern is that we professors, by emphasizing deception research out of proportion to its use within the field, distort the accuracy of students' perception of social psychology and, further, give support for a "fun and games" approach by students. My first adviser in graduate school, Ken Ring (1967), berated his colleagues for approaching the discipline in this manner; I want to warn you, as junior colleagues, about the same tendency. It's a real temptation, especially when sitting around and planning research, to go for the clever manipulation, or the setting that might make subjects appear foolish, or the study that will bring you laughs and attention when you describe it at the next weekend keg party.

Misreading Subject Reactions to Deception

Perhaps, for some of the reasons indicated in the preceding paragraph, I am at fault; most of my students long to do deception research. I suspect this is a common undergraduate tendency; the fact that you can legitimately, with your professor's blessing, dupe your peers is an exciting possibility. It sounds like fun disguised as class work, which, too often it can be. One tendency common to many novice researchers is the inability to gauge subject reaction to deception manipulations, specifically to underestimate the impact of even the mildest of deceptions.

Consequently, the following rule: never utilize deception in your research unless there is a compelling reason to do so. If no such rationale exists, always be honest with your subjects. This does not mean you have to inform them of all aspects of your research; sometimes partial information or an intentionally vague, but truthful, indication of your purposes is sufficient. We'll discuss an attitude-change study later that asks people to write in favor of the sale of condoms on campus. There's no need to falsely suggest that the dean, the freshman council, parents of current students, or the faculty are pushing such an idea when it would suffice to describe it as "an idea that has been thrown about on campus recently; we'd like to share your essay with some of those interested in the topic." The latter group may simply be your class, with its interest in attitude change. Is this deceptive? A little bit misleading, perhaps, but it is true that your class is interested in theories of attitude change, whereas it is patently false that the dean or a parent's group has those concerns. Further, if word gets back to the latter about your study, then you have some awkward explaining to do. People don't like to have their ideas misrepresented to others.

In the first chapter I described my own underestimation of the trauma caused by dramatizing a confrontation between a confederate and an undergraduate cast in the role of a department assistant interviewer. My mistake was mild, however, compared with some of the suggestions I've received over the years for generating anxiety in subjects or violating their rights to privacy. Bear this in mind as we begin to design studies. Being aware of significant differences in subject and peer reactions will allow you to better appreciate the need for piloting your research. This testing/assessment procedure can be as simple as trying out your manipulations on your research team peers and professor, before utilizing these manipulations on naive subjects.

Balancing Subject Welfare and Research Realism

Laboratory Research

You get to play God a little bit when you conduct deception research with human subjects. The emotional state and welfare of research subjects are frequently in your hands. As we have presumably demonstrated in our discussion of borderline ethics, no clear-cut distinction exists between what is acceptable in experimentation and what is not. There is no unequivocal limit, comparable to a 65-mile-hour speed limit on an interstate highway. The issue is further confused by other considerations, such as subject volunteer status and the significance of the research.

In the prototypic college experiment, students from General Psychology volunteer to participate in a laboratory research setting for which they are rewarded with one bonus point toward their grades.
There are lots of variations on this theme, but most have the following in common. Subjects have the opportunity to find out enough about the study in advance to make a reasoned decision as to whether they wish to participate. We say they have given their informed consent when they choose to be a part of studies of this type. Implicit in this situation is the ability of subjects to refuse participation. They should not be coerced, either by public pressure or academic need.

Further, following completion of the study, these lab research subjects are afforded a full debriefing, or explanation of the experiment, its components, deceptions (if any), and purpose. Ideally, in situations like these, subjects function as something akin to research partners.

On the other hand, we rarely deceive our partners. To some extent there is a potential ethical breach in lab studies using students. By and large, though, our responsibilities to them can be handled in a straightforward manner if the following guidelines are employed: (1) use only noncoerced volunteers, (2) let them know up front that any studies in which they participate may have aspects they will be unaware of until the study is concluded, (3) provide a thorough and sensitive debriefing following the conclusion of your study.

Field Settings

Laboratory research is decidedly artificial; college students are rarely a representative sample of all human beings, and prior knowledge that an experiment is being conducted often alters subjects' behavior. To combat these problems, researchers have frequently turned to field settings, using the real world as a laboratory. These studies are often conducted off campus, in downtown areas, along highways, and in shopping malls. The settings are more natural, we can obtain a better cross-section of the population, and the behavior of participants is unaffected. Why is it unaffected? Simply because they are unaware that an experiment is being conducted. This sounds great, but there is a heavy price that must be paid; there is a greater ethical problem with studies of this type.

Now we're really beginning to play God. Notice that these participants have not given their informed consent to participation. Would they mind being subjects for our research? Who knows? They weren't asked, and cannot be asked without reintroducing the subject awareness problem that plagues lab research. So we, as researchers, must make that decision for them, hopefully taking into account individual differences in reactions to novel situations.

Another classic study, often used in lectures because of its student appeal, is the subway study of Piliavin and Piliavin (1972). In this study, designed to investigate the very real problem of bystander emergency in field settings, the authors arranged to have confederate victims “collapse” under controlled conditions in actual subway cars in New York City. As the victim collapsed, he bit into a small soft plastic bubble of liquid red food dye that was hidden in his mouth. After he hit the floor of the subway car, the red food dye began to trickle from the corner of his mouth, simulating oozing blood. The research team observed the rapidity with which help was forthcoming from riders, taking notes on race and other characteristics of the subway patrons. Shortly thereafter, the confederate was helped to his feet by another member of the research team disguised as a subway rider, and all team members exited at the next station.

Clever study? Yes. Socially relevant and potentially important? You bet. Ethical? You make the call; I don’t know. What else we don’t know is the extent to which this study inflicted emotional distress on riders of the subway. Maybe older riders were bothered more. Maybe some had relatives who recently had collapsed and died. Maybe some were troubled all day because they stood by, yet knew they should have helped. Maybe none of these things happened, and the “jaded New Yorkers” took it in stride as just another bizarre occurrence in a life filled with similar happenings. The point is, and the problem is, we’ll never know because these subjects were not debriefed, just as they never gave their informed consent to participation in the first place.

I hope you notice the heavy ethical burden placed on the researchers in this instance. Somehow a field study’s potential contribution to the understanding of human behavior must be weighed against possible, but largely unknown, emotional effects it may have on participants if conducted. Just as children on a seesaw need to balance the weight of riders, social psychologists must weigh the methodological gains of field experimentation against their responsibilities to participants before conducting research.

Simulation Studies: An Unsatisfactory Alternative

Some concerned ethicists have suggested the use of simulation studies as an alternative to deception (Kelman, 1967). A simulation study does not put subjects through a deceptive situation, but asks in-
stead that they visualize themselves in such a situation and report how they would likely respond. Although this is a kinder and gentler procedure, serious questions can be raised concerning its validity. For example, one study (Doob and Gross, 1968) arranged to have two types of automobiles, either a high-status Chrysler or an older low-status vehicle stopped and first in line at a red light. When the light changed, the car did not move, presumably frustrating drivers waiting behind. The researchers recorded, on numerous trials, the frequency with which drivers honked at these vehicles and how long they waited before honking (two dependent variables). Results were clear and statistically significant in difference. The frustrated drivers honked more often and more quickly at the low-status car.

Now, consider this. Doob and Gross (1968) also conducted a simulation of the very same study, describing it to college males and asking them to indicate how they would behave in a similar situation. These simulation subjects indicated they would honk twice as quickly at the high-status vehicle, the opposite of results found in the field. Why the reverse? Is this part of some male macho posturing or bravado? Is this the kind of self-attrition that makes us talk tough and believe that when things get bad, like Johnny Paycheck, we’ll tell the boss to “take this job and shove it!” when what we’ll probably do is continue working and griping to anyone but the boss?

This question is fascinating in its own right, but the big point for us in this chapter is that simulation studies don’t function well as alternatives to actual experimentation.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN RESEARCH: SOME PERSONAL EXAMPLES

Delivering Shock to a Pet Store Rodent

Even though you think that any ethical considerations in your research have been dealt with, you are often in for a surprise. A few years ago, several members of my Advanced Social research class were sitting around the psych lab joking and exchanging ideas about theories of attitude change. Someone made the point that the door-in-the-face phenomenon had been examined only in positive situations, that no one had investigated its negative ramifications. This theory predicts that if you make a large initial request of people, one they are certain to refuse, they will be more likely to agree to a second, more moderate request. This time the zinger is that you knew all along they’d turn down your first request, but you didn’t care; it was the second request that you wanted them to agree to. Previous research of which we were aware (Cialdini 1975) first asked subjects to commit to an inordinately large, positive request; the presumed refusal was then followed by the actual target request. An example would be the initial request, “Would you be willing to serve as a big brother or sister to a juvenile delinquent for the next three years?,” followed by, “Well, would you be willing to chaperone some juvenile delinquents next Saturday on a field trip to a baseball game?” Research in this area seemed to deal only with prosocial behavior. No one, to our knowledge, had looked at the negative side; that is, refusing a large negative request might make subjects more susceptible to a more moderate negative target request.

Donna Brooks (1982), a student in this course, contrived a situation in which subjects were asked to deliver shock to a pet store rodent. In the unrealistically large initial request, student subjects were asked if they’d be willing to deliver increasingly severe electric shock to the animal, shock that would make the animal squeal in pain, eliminate on itself, and potentially experience heart stoppage and death. The target request was, “Well, would you be willing to deliver some brief, low level shocks then? If so, how many?" We hypothesized that, following rejection of the large, unrealistic initial request, subjects would be more likely to agree to the target request to administer low level shocks.

To our disbelief, most of the student subjects agreed to the initial request! These were liberal arts students at an institution known for its humanitarian concerns. They behaved very much like the subjects in the Milgram experiment. One said this study was “sick,” yet agreed to participate because it was an “experiment.” Ah, the power of the experimental setting.

This study had several consequences related to our discussion in this chapter. First, the students who agreed to shock this sweet, cute little animal almost to death were not sadists. They had reluctantly agreed, in a state of ambivalent tension, because it was an experiment; now they had to deal with their decision—"What kind of person am I, anyway?" We had caused emotional trauma to them, which had not been anticipated.

Donna also ran the study as a simulation similar to the Doob and Gross (1968) horn-honking study. True to form, simulation subjects said they would never agree to the initial request were they subjects in such an experiment.
Unintended Reactions: The Worried Mother

In another experiment, students helped me place phone calls to members of the clergy and members of the general public. The student caller claimed to be stranded on the side of the highway, in need of automotive assistance, and had accidentally reached this wrong number with her last dime. Would the subject help her out by placing a phone call to the stranded motorist’s garage?

We envisioned this as a relatively innocuous, straightforward helping behavior study that tied in with an existing body of research and might even also lead to a better understanding of good samaritanism. Although our subjects were unwitting residents of the area, rather than volunteer students in General Psychology, we foresaw no problems. They’d either agree and make the call to our assistant (pretending to be a garage mechanic) or refuse and hang up. Still, despite our intentions, we caused emotional upset to some subjects anyway. One good samaritan was an older mother who claimed she just couldn’t go to sleep knowing this poor girl was standing helpless along the side of the DC beltway. She spoke of past concerns for her own children in similar plights.

Our little experiment had been effective, too effective, but the evening’s schedule suggested we must move on. Realizing the perils of obedience to authority, we ignored our plans. Twenty minutes later our “stranded motorist” phoned this mother again, gratefully reporting that she had received assistance from the garage and was now safely home.

Should we have conducted this study? Should the adverse reaction of one person override the calm reactions of some 160 others? These tradeoffs are terribly difficult for the researcher to answer, yet someone must say thumbs-up or thumbs-down to any study.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ETHICS IN FIELD RESEARCH

The Public Viewpoint

A few years ago some researchers figured the best way to find out the things about social psychological research that might likely trouble the general public was: ask the general public! David Wilson and Edward Donnerstein (1976) sent student assistants out into areas typical of social psychology field research settings to talk to members of the general public similar to the subjects in field research studies. These students stopped people in parks, shopping centers, and parking lots; the researchers then described some classic field studies, asked the public how they might feel if they had been caught up in these studies, and then asked more general questions concerning the use of deception by social scientists, politicians, and the military. Finally they asked whether the general public ought to protest such deceptions.

Although the subway study mentioned earlier was judged the most unethical of the eight described to the subjects, no study received a majority negative vote on this measure. Subjects guessed they would feel harassed in some studies and would mind being subjects in these, but most did not view such studies as illegal and would not see a lawyer if caught up in one. By 41 percent to 38 percent, with 21 percent undecided, the subjects felt that “psychologists should stop deceiving the public as they do in these experiments.” However, by 45 percent to 38 percent, with 17 percent unsure, the respondents said the public should not protest against the actions that were described. Clearly there is a cognitive inconsistency here. The public went on to suggest that, of the three groups compared, it was more acceptable for psychologists to deceive the public (26 percent yes), than it was for the military (9 percent), or politicians (2 percent).

I’m not too sure what conclusions we can draw from this study. After all, these results amount to a simulation study, similar to the findings of the horn-honking and rat-shocking studies. Do members of the general public truly know how they would feel had they participated? Furthermore, these people are not scientists. Should they be given a veto right over studies that scientists think ought to be conducted? Is this an issue of ignorance versus arrogance?

Finally, while the public in general was reasonably tolerant of eight fairly notorious field deception studies, what of the rights of the minority? Is 50 percent public approval of our methods sufficient to okay the use of these techniques, or should we look for 90 percent or even 100 percent approval? As in most ethical issues, we must sort these issues out carefully for ourselves; there are no universal answers to these troubling questions.
**Entrapment: Okay for Psychologists but Not the Police?**

Another issue involves studies that provoke subjects to disobey the law or their own moral beliefs. There is almost universal belief that it is wrong to harm others or destroy their property without cause. Nonetheless, what do we make of studies that encourage such behavior—such as the Milgram study, in which subjects are presumably encouraged to harm a helpless middle-aged man, rather than disobey the experimenter. What of role-playing experiments like Zimbardo’s prison? How about studies in deindividuation, in which we observe people’s tendencies to engage in antisocial behaviors when they are sure they won’t be caught?

Such studies, as we’ve noted, make notable text and lecture material; more important, they also address serious social issues. But they also serve to entrap participants, coercing them into antisocial, illegal, or unethical behaviors they might otherwise have avoided.

Entrapment techniques are often used by police and often condemned by constitutional rights advocates. Is it right for policewomen to dress as hookers, solicit sex with likely customers, and then arrest these same people after they agree to terms? Is it right for the police or FBI to “set up” narcotics suspects? Some of you may recall the case of the Washington, D.C., mayor, Marion Barry, who was entrapped into illicit cocaine use by a sexy undercover policewoman. If the FBI does it, should we? Of course, the real reason I ask these questions is to get at a parallel ethical question for social science researchers.

My students have always been intrigued with the effects of modeling on behavior, going way back to the early 1970s, the days of the counterculture movement. We had read a classic study that found students more likely to jaywalk, to cross the street against a traffic light that said “Don’t Walk,” after observing a high-status model do so (Lefkowitz, Blake, and Mouton, 1955). Applying contemporary notions of status, the class wondered what might occur if the model were conceived as either a well-dressed college coed or a “hippie.” Using herself as the model in both conditions, one member of our class went to the downtown square in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, to conduct a field experiment addressing this question. By assuming both roles, she ruled out alternative explanations of her results as due to model differences, such as physical attractiveness or forcefulness, rather than her hippie/conservative appearance manipulation.

Back to our setting in the downtown Chambersburg square, a central city area built around an ever-vigilant statue of a union soldier looking south toward Maryland, with financial institutions on three of the four corners. Garbed first as a well-dressed coed, our student researcher began to cross the street against the light in a systematic fashion, as a confederate in a car recorded whether or not other pedestrians followed her lead. After the appropriate number of trials was run, and following a quick change into her “freak” outfit, she repeated the process and gathered the necessary data to address her hypothesis. She was interrupted only once, by an unhappy patrolman in a police car. Our modeling hypothesis was supported. Pedestrians jaywalked 72% of the time after seeing the conservative model violate the traffic signal, but only 42% of the time in response to the radical model. Fascinating results, but don’t lose sight of the major thrust of the discussion.

I’d like to make two points here. The first point is an ethical one. Was this experiment, which seeks, after all, to entice people into breaking the law by jaywalking, an example of entrapment as surely as when cops dress as prostitutes? I’d say yes. Should we have conducted this study? I gave it my okay at the time, reasoning that jaywalking is not really a crime to most people, certainly not the equivalent of stealing or assault, and anyway people weren’t forced to follow the model’s lead. Then again, they weren’t forced to continue in the Milgram experiment, were they?

The second point deals with a recurring phenomenon in this book; negative things will happen in field experimentation that the best preliminary thought does not predict. Why did the patrolman stop? Recall our typical downtown setting; typical small town square anchored by banks. Bankers are worried about their money; they really worry about someone stealing their money. They also like to have their bank officers sit in impressive bank offices overlooking the main street. Someone nearby, perhaps a worried bank officer, observed a young woman behaving suspiciously as though “casing” the area; she then left, only to reappear dressed totally differently (in disguise?). What’s a responsible person to do, especially if her institution’s funds are in jeopardy, except to notify the police. Our young researcher was able to reassure the policeman, who in turn did not attempt to stop her research. Not all
law enforcement personnel would be so understanding.

DEBRIEFING: PROCEDURES FOR A SENSITIVE AND INFORMATIVE INTERACTION

Responsibilities to Volunteer Subjects

For most students who participate as research subjects, the actual experimental experience is sandwiched between two ethical commitments. The first is, of course, informed consent. Typically, at this onset stage of experimentation, both subjects and experimenter need each other. Researchers must have, and are sometimes desperate for, volunteer participants for their studies. Students often need bonus points in the worst way. It's a nice meshing of needs, and this symbiotic situation works to guarantee that some form of informed consent is usually present. Since students are not forced to volunteer, researchers must make some attempts to promote student participation. Alternatively, some students sign up without any real consideration of the impact of a particular study on them. They, in effect, waive their right to be informed, and that's okay. Presumably the information was available, had they requested it. Other potential participants want more justification; presumably the justification they are given sufficiently informs them; if not, they may choose not to take part in the study. Either way, assuming the researcher does not totally misrepresent the study, incentives and checks work to ensure that both parties are satisfied with the relationship before things get under way.

Following the experiment, however, there is often a strong temptation for the researcher to "blow off" the other half of the ethical sandwich of experimentation, the debriefing component. The primary reason behind this tendency is selfish. At this point, subjects no longer hold any bargaining chips; the data have already been collected. Subjects are presumably of little further use to the Experimenters (with a capital E), and the Experimenters would be delighted to dismiss the subjects (Ss), as the Experimenters have more important things with which to deal.

This tendency to dismiss or give perfunctory attention to the debriefing not only reflects the exalted self-image assumed by researchers vis-a-vis their subjects, but clearly constitutes an ethical mis-

Less obvious is the fact that such a cavalier dismissal of ethical responsibility amounts to a major error in terms of methodology as well. A good de-

briefing serves purposes beyond simply explaining the experiment to subjects. Well structured, it can frequently affect the statistical results of your study. Let's see how this could occur in a typical lab study.

One study, which we have run with numerous original variations, involves asking subjects to take a public stand on issues with which they disagree. Students might, for example, write an essay on the value of Saturday classes at Hendrix, reasons a dress code would improve the college, the importance of senior comprehensive exams, etc. It is further implied that this issue is currently under consideration on campus; i.e., that such a change might really occur.

Typically, the experimental group writes a signed essay or gives a brief, persuasive speech as to why such a change would be beneficial. The given rationale is that the researcher is collecting ideas pro and con the issue, already has enough opposing statements, but, to be fair in comparisons, still needs persuasive arguments on the other side. Thus, subjects are subtly coerced (not forced) to take a public counterattitudinal stand, one that goes against what they privately believe.

Control subjects are simply exposed to the same arguments, by reading an essay or listening to a tape, but do not have any personal commitment to the stance taken. Some of you will recognize this as a classic dissonance theory paradigm. The theoretical prediction is that when one takes a public stand opposed to one's inner beliefs, cognitive conflict occurs; since most people find this uncomfortable and look for agreement between their private beliefs and public statements, a change in private beliefs follows. Our hypothesis would thus be that students taking a public counterattitudinal stand, either by writing signed essays or speaking briefly, should show greater attitude change in the direction of their public stands than those students who are simply familiarized with the materials.

Let's assume that most students favor the availability of birth control devices. Let's further suppose students write their essays on the topic "The sale of condoms should not be permitted on campus." You, as experimenter, collect these essays, together with a before- and after-indication of subjects' personal beliefs on the issue. You now have the data you desired to make your planned before-versus-after statistical comparison. It would be tempting to simply thank the student subjects, sign
off on their one-point bonus credit for participating in research, dismiss them, and be done.

Here are six reasons you should not do so:

1. Subjects may have been troubled in some way by having to support your choice of topics;
2. Some subjects may not have taken your experiment to heart, daydreaming their way through the hour;
3. Some may have misunderstood the procedure;
4. Some may have reacted in ways you had not anticipated;
5. Some may have understood the experiment because of prior familiarity with cognitive dissonance theory;
6. Some may have seen through your deceptions.

Let’s see how a sensitive debriefing could reveal many of these problems. First, realize that an unspoken bond often exists between experimenter and subject: you play your role and I’ll play mine. Thus, many subjects feel it is inappropriate to reveal that they have seen through your independent variable manipulation. You have to give them permission, indeed make it laudable, for them to alter this expectation.

Individual debriefings are often best, but, when many subjects are scheduled at the same time, a mass debriefing is often necessary. Still, it is possible to maintain some of the character of a one-on-one debriefing. Aronson et al. (1990) describe a step-by-step procedure that ought to be a model for most debriefings. The key is to probe suspicions and understandings of research in a systematic fashion, beginning with very general questions and proceeding gradually to highly specific procedural questions.

You might begin your debriefing by thanking everyone for being a part of your study, and then saying, “I’m now in a position where it’s possible to give you additional information about the study, so that you’ll have a fuller understanding of our research. Before we get to that, it would be helpful to me if you’d give me some indication of what it was like to be a participant in this study.” You might then distribute a sheet titled Subject Evaluation: Campus Issue Study, or some such vague title. Table 3.2 is an example of such a debriefing measure. Begin by asking participants questions that assure they have processed the basic information presented, e.g., “What was the campus issue addressed in this study?” To experience cognitive dissonance, subjects must have understood that implementa-

tion was a real possibility and that the committee would read their signed essays. Ask them: “What was the purpose of the essays you wrote or read by others?” “Who else will read these essays?” “What is the probability of the essays influencing a change in campus policy?” Such questions will allow you to assess whether subjects have paid attention to your independent variable manipulation and have “bought” the rationale that you provided.

What happens if they don’t know the answers to these questions? Data from these people should be eliminated from any statistical analysis you perform. This may strike you as undesirable at first, since you’ve worked so hard to get these data, but such evaluations are from undesirable subjects and would likely weaken any effect that might be observed. Theoretically, these subjects should not have experienced the cognitive dissonance you intended.

Your debriefing should also probe the students’ own feelings on experimental issues. For example, what was their personal opinion concerning the sale of condoms on campus prior to the experiment? You want to eliminate from analyses subjects who did not express counterattitudinal opinions in their essays. If they believed all along, say for religious reasons, that condoms should not be sold on campus, then the dissonance theory prediction could not be adequately tested; even though these subjects processed all aspects of the study, they would not be taking a counterattitudinal stand.

Alternative Ethical Considerations With Nonvolunteer Subjects

Assessing the ethical acceptability of field research is the toughest call of all, and especially difficult for novice researchers. There are three critical components that make field research sensitive to matters of methodological principle:

- The field researcher has no control over who will participate,
- Participants don’t volunteer to be in your study (leaving you in a very awkward situation, should things backfire), and
- There is usually no opportunity for debriefing.

If you inadvertently cause emotional distress to subjects, you will not be able to rectify this situation. For these reasons, studies of this type are left for the end of this book, when you will be best prepared to tackle them.
TABLE 3.2 Postexperiment Questionnaire

Participant Reaction Inventory

We want to make this study as sound a project as possible; your thoughtful responses to this brief questionnaire will help both the researcher and future participants. Therefore, please feel free to respond candidly to all questions. Since some questions build on earlier responses, be sure to take the questions in the order indicated.

Course ___________________________ Date _______

1. a) Did the experimenter provide a clear understanding of the purpose underlying today's experiment?

b) What was your understanding of the reason for this study, as explained by the experimenter?

2. Did any other possible reason for the study occur to you?
   ______ yes ______ no   If yes, please tell us about these:

3. Sometimes research is designed to test specific theories or psychological effects. What theory or effect, if any, might have been under investigation?

4. When the experimenter analyzes the data from this study, what do you suppose will be the most important comparison made?

5. Sometimes participants believe there is more to an experiment than meets the eye.  
a) Did you feel that way at all today?
   ______ yes ______ no   (If no, go to question 6.)

b) if yes, why?

   (1) at what point, specifically, during the experiment did you have this experience?

6. Please add any comments, pro or con, that you think could make this study even more effective for future participants.

7. Would you like to receive a copy of the design and findings from this study, when concluded?
   ______ yes ______ no

Your Name ___________________________________________ (optional, unless you wish a copy of the results)
Campus Address _______________________________________

Thanks again for your time,

Researcher's signature

But, for a moment, let's consider the ethics of this type of research. Where you draw the line is difficult to define. I'd strongly encourage you to err on the conservative side here, leaving studies like the public collapse with blood on the subway to more experienced researchers. It takes considerable experience to bring off major field deceptions successfully, and the price one could pay for failure is probably more than you would care to risk.
Individual Work Sheet
Borderline Ethics Experiments

Your Name ___________________________________ Date ______________________

The purpose of this exercise is to think through and write down the components of an experiment that falls within the "gray" area between ethical acceptance and rejection. Outline the method by which this study might be conducted, and be prepared to answer any procedural questions that the group might raise. Remember to say nothing concerning your ethical concerns when presenting the study.

1. Purpose of Study

2. Subjects (source, characteristics, volunteer status, debriefed?)

3. Location where data gathered

4. Procedure. This is the most important consideration.
   a. Give a step-by-step description of your study, from first through final subject contact.
   b. Give details on all manipulations employed and the manner by which data are collected. Consider both experimenter and subject perspectives.

5. Indicate your ethical concerns regarding this research below. Remember, do not reveal these to the research group when you present your study. Ethical issues are not discussed until after all studies have been presented and evaluated by group members.

Submit this sheet or a copy to your professor following your group meeting.
Research Team Evaluation Sheet
Rankings and Ethical Evaluations:
Borderline Ethics Experiments

Your Name ___________________ Date ____________________

Submit this sheet or a copy to your professor.

<table>
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<th>Study Summary</th>
<th>Your Rank; U/E</th>
<th>Team Member Rankings and U/E</th>
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Comments on This Exercise or Specific Studies:

Names/Initials of Research Team Members/Evaluators

Continued