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## Chapter 3

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### Research Ethics

#### Ethics in Sociological Research

Can pursuing a career in sociology land you in jail? As inconceivable as that may sound, ask sociology graduate student Scott DeMuth, and he'll likely tell you that indeed it can. Mr. DeMuth's recent jailing sparked debate across the blogosphere about the ethical rights and obligations of social researchers and about the moral and public purpose of sociological research. We'll discuss DeMuth's research later in this chapter. But first, let's consider the primary factor that shapes the ethics of sociological research: the fact that we conduct research on living human beings.

## 3.1 Research on Humans

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define the term *human subjects*.
2. Describe and provide examples of nonhuman subjects that sociologists might examine.
3. Provide a brief outline of the history of research on human subjects.
4. Define institutional review boards and describe their purpose.

In 1998, actor Jim Carey starred in the movie *The Truman Show*. You can read a brief synopsis of the film at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120382>. At first glance, the film appears to depict a perfect sociological experiment. Just imagine the possibilities if we could control every aspect of a person's life, from how and where that person lives to where he or she works to whom he or she marries. Of course, keeping someone in a bubble, controlling every aspect of his or her life, and sitting back and watching would be highly unethical (not to mention illegal). However, the movie clearly inspires thoughts about the differences between sociological research and research on nonhumans. One of the most exciting—and most challenging—aspects of conducting sociological research is the fact that (at least much of the time) our subjects are living human beings whose free will and human rights will always have an impact on what we are able to research and how we are able to conduct that research.

### Human Research Versus Nonhuman Research

While all research comes with its own set of ethical concerns, those associated with research conducted on **human subjects**<sup>1</sup> vary dramatically from those of research conducted on nonliving entities. The US Department of Health and Human Services defines a human subject as “a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable private information” (1993). US Department of Health and Human Services. (1993).

Institutional review board guidebook glossary. Retrieved from [http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/archive/irb/irb\\_glossary.htm](http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/archive/irb/irb_glossary.htm)

1. A living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains (a) data through intervention or interaction with the individual or (b) identifiable private information.

In some states, human subjects also include deceased individuals and human fetal materials. Nonhuman research subjects, on the other hand, are objects or entities that investigators manipulate or analyze in the process of conducting research. In sociology, nonhuman research subjects typically include sources such as newspapers, historical documents, advertisements, television shows, buildings, and even garbage (to name just a few) that are analyzed for unobtrusive research projects.

Unsurprisingly, research on human subjects is regulated much more heavily than research on nonhuman subjects. However, there are ethical considerations that all researchers must consider regardless of their research subject. We'll discuss those considerations in addition to concerns that are unique to research on human subjects.

### A Historical Look at Research on Humans

Research on humans hasn't always been regulated in the way that it is today. The earliest documented cases of research using human subjects are of medical vaccination trials (Rothman, 1987). Rothman, D. J. (1987). Ethics and human experimentation. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 317, 1195–1199. One such case took place in the late 1700s, when scientist Edward Jenner exposed an 8-year-old boy to smallpox in order to identify a vaccine for the devastating disease. Medical research on human subjects continued without much law or policy intervention until the mid-1900s when, at the end of World War II, a number of Nazi doctors and scientists were put on trial for conducting human experimentation during the course of which they tortured and murdered many concentration camp inmates (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). One little-known fact, as described by Faden and Beauchamp in their 1986 book, is that at the very time that the Nazis conducted their horrendous experiments, Germany did actually have written regulations specifying that human subjects must clearly and willingly consent to their participation in medical research. Obviously these regulations were

Figure 3.1



Sociologists study human subjects through such methods as one-on-one, in-person interviews.

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Figure 3.2



Trash is one kind of nonhuman subject that social scientists might examine.

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completely disregarded by the Nazi experimenters, but the fact that they existed suggests that efforts to regulate the ethical conduct of research, while necessary, are certainly not sufficient for ensuring that human subjects' rights will be honored. Faden, R. R., & Beauchamp, T. L. (1986). *A history and theory of informed consent*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. The trials, conducted in Nuremberg, Germany, resulted in the creation of the **Nuremberg Code**<sup>2</sup>, a 10-point set of research principles designed to guide doctors and scientists who conduct research on human subjects. Today, the Nuremberg Code guides medical and other research conducted on human subjects, including social scientific research.

Medical scientists are not the only researchers who have conducted questionable research on humans. In the 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram (1974) Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*. New York, NY: Harper & Row. conducted a series of experiments designed to understand obedience to authority in which he tricked subjects into believing they were administering an electric shock to other subjects. In fact, the shocks weren't real at all, but some, though not many, of Milgram's research participants experienced extreme emotional distress after the experiment (Ogden, 2008). Ogden, R. (2008). Harm. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 379–380). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. A reaction of emotional distress is understandable. The realization that one is willing to administer painful shocks to another human being just because someone who looks authoritative has told you to do so might indeed be traumatizing—even if you later learn that the shocks weren't real.

2. A 10-point set of research ethics principles developed following the trials of Nazi criminals who conducted human experimentation on concentration camp inmates.

Figure 3.3



Stanley Milgram led his research participants to believe that they were administering real electric shock to other subjects.

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Around the same time that Milgram conducted his experiments, sociology graduate student Laud Humphreys (1970) Humphreys, L. (1970). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. London, UK: Duckworth. was collecting data for his dissertation research on the tearoom trade, the practice of men engaging in anonymous sexual encounters in public restrooms. Humphreys wished to understand who these men were and why they participated in the trade. To conduct his research, Humphreys offered to serve as a “watch queen,” the person who keeps an eye out for police and gets the benefit of being able to watch the sexual encounters, in a local park restroom where the tearoom trade was known to occur. What Humphreys did *not* do was identify himself as a researcher to his research

Figure 3.4



Laud Humphreys conducted his observations in public restrooms.

subjects. Instead, he watched his subjects for several months, getting to know several of them, learning more about the tearoom trade practice and, without the knowledge of his research subjects, jotting down their license plate numbers as they pulled into or out of the parking lot near the restroom. Some time after participating as a watch queen, with the help of several insiders who had access to motor vehicle registration information, Humphreys used those license plate numbers to obtain the names and home addresses of his research subjects. Then, disguised as a public health researcher, Humphreys visited his subjects in their homes and interviewed them about their lives and their health. Humphreys's research dispelled a good number of myths and stereotypes about the tearoom trade and its participants. He learned, for example, that over half of his subjects were married to women and many of them did not identify as gay or bisexual. Humphreys's research is still relevant today. In fact, as the 2007 arrest of Idaho Senator Larry Craig in a public restroom at the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport attests, undercover police operations targeting tearoom activities still occur, more than 40 years after Humphreys conducted his research. Humphreys's research is also frequently cited by attorneys who represent clients arrested for lewd behavior in public restrooms.

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Once Humphreys's work became public, the result was some major controversy at his home university (e.g., the chancellor tried to have his degree revoked), among sociologists in general, and among members of the public, as it raised public concerns about the purpose and conduct of sociological research. In addition, the *Washington Post* journalist Nicholas von Hoffman wrote the following warning about “sociological snoopers”:

We're so preoccupied with defending our privacy against insurance investigators, dope sleuths, counterespionage men, divorce detectives and credit checkers, that we overlook the social scientists behind the hunting blinds who're also peeping into what we thought were our most private and secret lives. But they are there, studying us, taking notes, getting to know us, as indifferent as everybody else to the feeling that to be a complete human involves having an aspect of ourselves that's unknown. (von Hoffman, 2008) Von Hoffman, N. (1970, January 30). Sociological snoopers. *The Washington Post*, p. B1.

In the original version of his report, Humphreys defended the ethics of his actions. In 2008, years after Humphreys's death, his book was reprinted with the addition of a retrospect on the ethical implications of his work. Humphreys, L. (2008). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places, enlarged edition with a retrospect on ethical issues*. New Brunswick, NJ: AldineTransaction. In his written reflections on his research and the fallout from it, Humphreys maintained that his tearoom observations constituted ethical research on the grounds that those interactions occurred in public places. But Humphreys added that he would conduct the second part of his

research differently. Rather than trace license numbers and interview unwitting tearoom participants in their homes under the guise of public health research, Humphreys instead would spend more time in the field and work to cultivate a pool of informants. Those informants would know that he was a researcher and would be able to fully consent to being interviewed. In the end, Humphreys concluded that “there is no reason to believe that any research subjects have suffered because of my efforts, or that the resultant demystification of impersonal sex has harmed society” (p. 231). Humphreys, L. (2008). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places, enlarged edition with a retrospect on ethical issues*. New Brunswick, NJ: AldineTransaction.

As should be evident by now, there is no clear or easy answer to the question of whether Humphreys conducted ethical research. Today, given increasing regulation of social scientific research, chances are slim that a sociologist would be allowed to conduct a project similar to Humphreys’s. Some argue that Humphreys’s research was deceptive, put his subjects at risk of losing their families and their positions in society, and was therefore unethical (Warwick, 1973; Warwick, 1982). Warwick, D. P. (1973). Tearoom trade: Means and ends in social research. *Hastings Center Studies*, 1, 39–49. See also Warwick, D. P. (1982). Types of harm in social research. In T. L. Beauchamp, R. R. Faden, R. J. Wallace Jr., & L. Walters (Eds.), *Ethical issues in social science research*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Others suggest that Humphreys’s research “did not violate any premise of either beneficence or the sociological interest in social justice” and that the benefits of Humphreys’s research, namely the dissolution of myths about the tearoom trade specifically and human sexual practice more generally, outweigh the potential risks associated with the work (Lenza, 2004). Lenza, M. (2004). Controversies surrounding Laud Humphreys’ tearoom trade: An unsettling example of politics and power in methodological critiques. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 24, 20–31. See also Nardi, P. M. (1995). “The breastplate of righteousness”: Twenty-five years after Laud Humphreys’ *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 30, 1–10. What do you think, and why?

These and other studies (Reverby, 2009) One such study is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, conducted in Alabama from the 1930s to the 1970s. The goal of the study was to understand the natural progression of syphilis in human beings. Investigators working for the Public Health Service enrolled hundreds of poor African American men in the study, some of whom had been diagnosed with syphilis and others who had not. Even after effective syphilis treatment was identified in the 1940s, research participants were denied treatment so that researchers could continue to observe the progression of the disease. The study came to an end in 1972 after knowledge of the experiment became public. In 1997, President Clinton publicly apologized on behalf of the American people for the study (<http://clinton4.nara.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html>).

For more on the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, see Reverby, S. M. (2009). *Examining Tuskegee: The infamous syphilis study and its legacy*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. led to increasing public awareness of and concern about research on human subjects. In 1974, the US Congress enacted the National Research Act, which created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The commission produced *The Belmont Report*, a document outlining basic ethical principles for research on human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). *The Belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research*. Retrieved from <http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html> The National Research Act also required that all institutions receiving federal support establish **institutional review boards (IRBs)**<sup>3</sup> to protect the rights of human research subjects (1974). National Research Act of 1974, Pub. L. no. 93-348 Stat 88. (1974). The act can be read at <http://history.nih.gov/research/downloads/PL93-348.pdf>. Since that time, many organizations that do *not* receive federal support but where research is conducted have also established review boards to evaluate the ethics of the research that they conduct.

### Institutional Review Boards

IRBs are tasked with ensuring that the rights and welfare of human research subjects will be protected at all institutions, including universities, hospitals, nonprofit research institutions, and other organizations, that receive federal support for research. IRBs typically consist of members from a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, economics, education, social work, and communications (to name a few). Most IRBs also include representatives from the community in which they reside. For example, representatives from nearby prisons, hospitals, or treatment centers might sit on the IRBs of university campuses near them. The diversity of membership helps to ensure that the many and complex ethical issues that may arise from human subjects research will be considered fully and by a knowledgeable and experienced panel. Investigators conducting research on human subjects are required to submit proposals outlining their research plans to IRBs for review and approval prior to beginning their research. Even students who conduct research on human subjects must have their proposed work reviewed and approved by the IRB before beginning any research (though, on some campuses, some exceptions are made for classroom projects that will not be shared outside of the classroom).

3. An interdisciplinary review committee tasked with protecting the rights of human research subjects by weighing the relative costs and benefits of proposed research and making decisions about whether said research may be carried out at their organization.

Figure 3.5



*Institutional review boards weigh the relative risks and benefits of research and protect the rights of human research subjects.*

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It may surprise you to hear that IRBs are not always popular or appreciated by researchers. Who *wouldn't* want to conduct ethical research, you ask? In some cases, the concern is that IRBs are most well versed in reviewing biomedical and experimental research, neither of which is particularly common within sociology. Much sociological research, especially qualitative research, is open ended in nature, a fact that can be problematic for IRBs. The members of IRBs often want to know in advance exactly who will be observed, where, when, and for how long, whether and how they will be approached, exactly what questions they will be asked, and what predictions the researcher has for her or his findings. Providing this level of detail for a yearlong participant observation within an activist group of 200-plus members, for example, would be extraordinarily frustrating for the researcher in the best case and most likely would prove to be impossible. Of course, IRBs do not intend to have researchers avoid studying controversial topics or avoid using certain methodologically sound data-collection techniques, but unfortunately, that is sometimes the result. The solution is not to do away with review boards, which serve a necessary and important function, but instead to help educate IRB members about the variety of social scientific research methods and topics covered by sociologists and other social scientists.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The fact that many of our research subjects in sociology are human presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities when it comes to conducting ethical research.
- Research on human subjects has not always been regulated to the extent that it is today.
- All institutions receiving federal support for research must have an IRB. Organizations that do not receive federal support but where research is conducted also often include IRBs as part of their organizational structure.

## EXERCISES

1. Read the 10 principles of the Nuremberg Code at the National Institutes of Health website: <http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/nuremberg.html>. Consider how these principles apply to sociological research.
2. Check out the IRB on your campus. Most IRBs have websites that contain useful information about the review process, membership, specific campus rules and regulations, and training. How does the IRB on your campus operate? Who are its members?
3. Watch the 2004 film *Kinsey*. How might your campus's IRB respond to Alfred Kinsey's research were he to submit a proposal for his work today? Why?
4. Read about Professor Jin Li's 2011 lawsuit against Brown University, whose IRB barred Li from using data she had collected in a study of Chinese American children's learning beliefs and socialization: <http://www.browndailyherald.com/professor-sues-u-over-research-protocol-1.2518118#.Tyx7sCOQ1Lc>. What is your opinion of this case? Should Li be allowed to use her data? Why or why not?

## 3.2 Specific Ethical Issues to Consider

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define informed consent, and describe how it works.
2. Identify the unique concerns related to the study of vulnerable populations.
3. Understand the definitions of and the differences between anonymity and confidentiality.
4. Explain the five general principles of the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics.

As should be clear by now, conducting research on humans presents a number of unique ethical considerations. Human research subjects must be given the opportunity to consent to their participation in research. Further, subjects' identities and the information they share should be protected by researchers. Of course, how consent and identity protection are defined may vary by individual researcher, institution, or academic discipline. In [Section 3.1 "Research on Humans"](#), we examined the role that institutions play in shaping research ethics. In this section, we'll take a look at a few specific topics that individual researchers and sociologists in general must consider before embarking on research with human subjects.

### Informed Consent

A norm of voluntary participation is presumed in all sociological research projects. In other words, we cannot force anyone to participate in our research without that person's knowledge or consent (so much for that *Truman Show* experiment). Researchers must therefore design procedures to obtain subjects' **informed consent**<sup>4</sup> to participate in their research. Informed consent is defined as a subject's voluntary agreement to participate in research based on a full understanding of the research and of the possible risks and benefits involved. Although it sounds simple, ensuring that one has actually obtained informed consent is a much more complex process than you might initially presume.

4. A subject's voluntary agreement to participate in research based on a full understanding of the research and of the possible risks and benefits involved.

The first requirement is that, in giving their informed consent, subjects may neither waive nor even *appear* to waive any of their legal rights. Subjects also cannot release a researcher, his or her sponsor, or institution from any legal liability should something go wrong during the course of their participation in the

research (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). US Department of Health and Human Services. (2009). Code of federal regulations (45 CFR 46). The full set of requirements for informed consent can be read at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.116>. Because sociological research does not typically involve asking subjects to place themselves at risk of physical harm by, for example, taking untested drugs or consenting to new medical procedures, sociological researchers do not often worry about potential liability associated with their research projects. However, their research may involve other types of risks. For example, what if a sociological researcher fails to sufficiently conceal the identity of a subject who admits to participating in a local swinger's club, enjoying a little sadomasochistic activity now and again or violating her marriage vows? While the law may not have been broken in any of these cases, the subject's social standing, marriage, custody rights, or employment could be jeopardized were any of these tidbits to become public. This example might seem rather extreme, but the point remains: even sociologists conduct research that could come with some very real legal ramifications.

Beyond the legal issues, most institutional review boards (IRBs) require researchers to share some details about the purpose of the research, possible benefits of participation, and, most importantly, possible risks associated with participating in that research with their subjects. In addition, researchers must describe how they will protect subjects' identities, how and for how long any data collected will be stored, and whom to contact for additional information about the study or about subjects' rights. All this information is typically shared in an informed consent form that researchers provide to subjects. In some cases, subjects are asked to sign the consent form indicating that they have read it and fully understand its contents. In other cases, subjects are simply provided a copy of the consent form and researchers are responsible for making sure that subjects have read and understand the form before proceeding with any kind of data collection. **Figure 3.6 "Sample Informed Consent Form"** contains a sample informed consent form taken from a research project on child-free adults. Note that this consent form describes a risk that may be unique to the particular method of data collection being employed: focus groups.

Figure 3.6 Sample Informed Consent Form

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM: FOCUS GROUPS**

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Dr. Amy Blackstone, a faculty member in the Department of Sociology at the University of Maine. The purpose of the research is to understand the processes by which adults without children decide to not have children and the social responses to their choice.

**What Will You Be Asked to Do?**  
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to respond to questions about your decision to not have children. Specific questions include the following: Why did you make the decision to remain childfree? What do you most enjoy about your childfree lifestyle? What are some of the drawbacks of your childfree lifestyle? How have others responded to your decision? What role does your status as married or single play in people's responses? What role does your identity as heterosexual or homosexual play in people's responses? What does the word "family" mean to you? It will take between 75 and 115 minutes to participate.

**Risks**  
- In addition to your time and inconvenience, there is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable answering the questions.  
- Due to the focus group format, it is possible the confidentiality of your responses will not be maintained by other focus group participants.

**Benefits**  
- Except for the compensation you will receive (see below), there are no other benefits to you from participating in this study.  
- While this study will have no direct benefit to you, this research will help us learn more about the processes by which some adults choose not to rear children. This population has been understudied in sociological research.

**Compensation**  
You will receive \$20 for participating in a focus group.

**Confidentiality**  
Your name will not be kept on any documents except a participant key (see below). A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. The focus group will be tape recorded and then transcribed. Recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet inside Dr. Blackstone's locked office and destroyed after data analysis is complete (by or before August 2010). Research assistant Alyssa Radmore will have access to the data in Dr. Blackstone's office when Dr. Blackstone is present. Your name or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. The key linking your name to the data will be destroyed after data analysis is complete. Written focus group transcripts will be kept indefinitely in Dr. Blackstone's locked office. These transcripts will not contain any identifying information such as your name. Because individuals in addition to the researchers will be present during the focus group, your confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

**Voluntary**  
Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time during the study. Stopping the study will not alter the compensation you will receive. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Skipping questions will not alter the compensation you will receive.

**Contact Information**  
If you have any questions about this study, please contact me by phone (207-581-2392), e-mail (amy.blackstone@umit.maine.edu), or mail (University of Maine Department of Sociology, 5728 Fernald Hall, Orono, ME 04469). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 207-581-1498 (or e-mail gayle.anderson@umit.maine.edu).

One last point to consider when preparing to obtain informed consent is that not all potential research subjects are considered equally competent or legally allowed to consent to participate in research. These subjects are sometimes referred to as members of **vulnerable populations**<sup>5</sup>, people who may be at risk of experiencing undue influence or coercion. The US Department of Health and Human Services' guidelines on vulnerable populations can be read at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/populations>.

Figure 3.7

5. Subjects who may be at risk of experiencing undue influence or coercion. This typically includes minors, prisoners, parolees, patients, mentally or physically disabled individuals, fetuses and pregnant women, and economically or educationally disadvantaged individuals.



*Prisoners, children, and pregnant women are all examples of populations defined as vulnerable in human subjects research.*

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The rules for consent are more stringent for vulnerable populations. For example, minors must have the consent of a legal guardian in order to participate in research. In some cases, the minors themselves are also asked to participate in the consent process by signing special, age-appropriate consent forms designed specifically for them. Prisoners and parolees also qualify as vulnerable populations. Concern about the vulnerability of these subjects comes from the very real possibility that prisoners and parolees could perceive that they will receive some highly desired reward, such as early release, if they participate in research. Another potential concern regarding vulnerable populations is that they may be underrepresented in research, and even denied potential benefits of participation in research, specifically because of concerns about their ability to consent. So on the one hand, researchers must take extra care to ensure that their procedures for obtaining consent from vulnerable populations are not coercive. And the procedures for receiving approval to conduct research on these groups may be more rigorous than that for nonvulnerable populations. On the other hand, researchers must work to avoid excluding members of vulnerable populations from participation simply on the grounds that they are vulnerable or that obtaining their consent may be more complex. While there is no easy solution to this double-edged sword, an awareness of the potential concerns associated with research on vulnerable populations is important for identifying whatever solution is most appropriate for a specific case.

### Protection of Identities

6. Occurs when no identifying information is collected or maintained on research subjects, and no one, including the researcher, can connect individual participants with their data such as interview quotes or survey responses.

7. Occurs when some identifying information on research subjects is kept, but only the researcher can link participants with their data, and he or she promises not to do so publicly.

As mentioned earlier, the informed consent process includes the requirement that researchers outline how they will protect the identities of subjects. This aspect of the process, however, is one of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of research.

In protecting subjects' identities, researchers typically promise to maintain either the **anonymity**<sup>6</sup> or the **confidentiality**<sup>7</sup> of their research subjects. Anonymity is the more stringent of the two. When a researcher promises anonymity to participants, not even the researcher is able to link participants' data with their identities. Anonymity may be impossible for some sociological researchers to promise because several of the modes of data collection that sociologists employ, such as participant observation and face-to-face interviewing, require that researchers know the

identities of their research participants. In these cases, a researcher should be able to at least promise confidentiality to participants. Offering confidentiality means that some identifying information on one's subjects is known and may be kept, but only the researcher can link participants with their data and he or she promises not to do so publicly. As you can see under the "Risks" section of the consent form in [Figure 3.6 "Sample Informed Consent Form"](#), sometimes it is not even possible to promise that a subject's confidentiality will be maintained. This is the case if data are collected in public or in the presence of other research participants in the course of a group interview, for example.

Figure 3.8



*The woman on the left in this photo may be promising her research subjects confidentiality; she can see the identities of her research subjects, but she promises not to tell others who they are. The woman on the right may be promising her research subjects anonymity; even she cannot identify her research subjects. The woman in the middle may be telling us that she has an earache.*

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Protecting research participants' identities is not always a simple prospect, especially for those conducting research on stigmatized groups or illegal behaviors.

Sociologist Scott DeMuth learned that all too well when conducting his dissertation research on a group of animal rights activists. As a participant observer, DeMuth knew the identities of his research subjects. So when some of his research subjects vandalized facilities and removed animals from several research labs at the University of Iowa, a grand jury called on Mr. DeMuth to reveal the identities of the participants in the raid. When DeMuth refused to do so, he was jailed briefly and then charged with conspiracy to commit animal enterprise terrorism and cause damage to the animal enterprise (Jaschik, 2009). Jaschik, S. (2009, December 4). Protecting his sources. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/12/04/demuth>

Publicly, DeMuth's case raised many of the same questions as Laud Humphreys' work 40 years earlier. What do social scientists owe the public? Is DeMuth, by protecting his research subjects, harming those whose labs were vandalized? Is he harming the taxpayers who funded those labs? Or is it more important that DeMuth emphasize what he owes his research subjects, who were told their identities would be protected? DeMuth's case also sparked controversy among academics, some of whom thought that as an academic himself, DeMuth should have been more sympathetic to the plight of the faculty and students who lost years of research as a result of the attack on their labs. Many others stood by DeMuth, arguing that the personal and academic freedom of scholars must be protected whether we support their research topics and subjects or not. DeMuth's academic adviser even created a new group, Scholars for Academic Justice (<http://sajumn.wordpress.com>), to support DeMuth and other academics who face persecution or prosecution as a result of the research they conduct. What do you think? Should DeMuth have revealed the identities of his research subjects? Why or why not?

### **Disciplinary Considerations**

Often times specific disciplines will provide their own set of guidelines for protecting research subjects and, more generally, for conducting ethical research. For sociologists, the American Sociological Association (ASA) has adopted a set of ethical principles intended to guide researchers in the discipline (2008). American Sociological Association. (2008). *Code of ethics and policies and procedures of the ASA committee on professional ethics*. Washington, DC: ASA. The ASA Code features the following five general principles:

1. Professional competence
2. Integrity
3. Professional and scientific responsibility
4. Respect for people's rights, dignity, and diversity
5. Social responsibility

The principle of professional competence states that researchers should recognize their own limitations and only conduct research for which they have been properly trained. It also states that researchers should engage in ongoing education for themselves in order to remain competent. The principle of integrity directs that sociologists be “honest, fair, and respectful” in *all* their professional activities including, but not limited to, their research activities. The third principle, professional and scientific responsibility, guides sociologists to be respectful in their relationships with one another at the same time that it warns against collegiality if it impedes one’s ability to behave ethically. This principle balances scientific collegiality with public trust in sociology. The fourth principle, respect for people’s rights, dignity, and diversity, addresses the need to reduce bias in all professional activities. Finally, social responsibility, the fifth principle, states that sociologists should “strive to advance the science of sociology and serve the public good.”

On their faces, these five principles seem straightforward and relatively easy to abide by. Of course, each of these principles, along with the 20, more specific ethical standards that follow in the ASA Code, must be interpreted by individual researchers. Consider, for example, how those who support Scott DeMuth’s decision to remain silent about his research subjects’ identities might differ in their understanding of the principles from those who feel that DeMuth should testify and break his promise of confidentiality to subjects.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Researchers must obtain the informed consent of the people who participate in their research.
- If a researcher promises anonymity, he or she cannot link individual participants with their data.
- If a researcher promises confidentiality, he or she promises not to reveal the identities of research participants, even though the researcher can link individual participants with their data.
- The ASA has developed a Code of Ethics to which American sociologists are expected to adhere.

## EXERCISES

1. Go to the Scholars for Academic Justice website at <http://sajumn.wordpress.com>. What is your position on the cases that are described there?
2. Look up the American Sociological Association's full Code of Ethics, which includes ethical guidelines for research as well as guidelines for the other roles that sociologists play, such as teaching, at <http://asanet.org/images/asa/docs/pdf/CodeofEthics.pdf>. Can you find the five principles noted previously? What more have you learned about the ASA Code of Ethics by reviewing the full code online?

### 3.3 Ethics at Micro, Meso, and Macro Levels

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Identify and distinguish between micro-, meso-, and macrolevel considerations with respect to the ethical conduct of social scientific research.

One useful way to think about the breadth of ethical questions that might arise out of any research project is to think about potential issues from the perspective of different analytical levels. In [Chapter 2 "Linking Methods With Theory"](#), you learned about the micro, meso, and macro levels of inquiry and how a researcher's specific point of focus might vary depending on his or her level of inquiry. Here we'll apply the micro-meso-macro framework to a discussion of research ethics. Within most research projects, there are specific questions that arise for researchers at each of these three levels.

At the **micro level**<sup>8</sup>, researchers must consider their own conduct and the rights of individual research participants. For example, did Stanley Milgram behave ethically when he allowed research participants to think that they were administering electronic shocks to fellow participants? Did Laud Humphreys behave ethically when he deceived his research subjects about his own identity? Were the rights of individuals in these studies protected? While there may not be any easy answers, the questions posed here are the sort that you will want to ask yourself as a researcher when considering ethics at the micro level.

At the **meso level**<sup>9</sup>, researchers should think about the expectations of their given profession (in this case, sociology). As discussed in [Section 3.2 "Specific Ethical Issues to Consider"](#), the American Sociological Association (ASA) has a Code of Ethics that outlines our profession's expectations when it comes to how we conduct our research. The ASA also has a strong history of supporting sociologists who conduct research in a way that follows the Code of Ethics but for which they experience some legal trouble. In 2009, for example, when Scott DeMuth was facing terrorism charges, the ASA's Animals and Societies Section wrote a public statement in support of DeMuth. Council of the Animals and Society Section of the American Sociological Association: Support for Scott DeMuth. (2009). Retrieved from <http://davenportgrandjury.wordpress.com/solidarity-statements/council-animals-society-as> Sixteen years earlier, in 1993, the ASA wrote an amicus brief in support of Washington State University sociology graduate student Rik Scarce who,

8. Take into account individual-level questions of ethics such as the conduct of a specific researcher. At the micro level, researchers must consider their own conduct and the rights of individual research participants.

9. Take into account disciplinary or professional questions of ethics such as a profession's ethical guidelines. At the meso level, researchers should think about the expectations of their given profession.

like DeMuth, was conducting a study of animal rights activism for his dissertation research. American Sociological Association. (1993). Case 99: A real case involving the protection of confidential data. Retrieved from <http://www.asanet.org/ethics/detail.cfm?id=Case99> Scarce spent 159 days in jail because he refused to share with authorities the nature of conversations he'd had with several of his research participants, animal rights activists suspected of vandalizing animal research facilities (Scarce v. United States, 1993). *Scarce v. United States*, 5 F.3d 397, 399–400 (9th Cir. 1993).

Finally, at the **macro level**<sup>10</sup>, a researcher should consider her or his duty to, and the expectations of, society. Perhaps the most high-profile case involving macrolevel questions of research ethics comes from debates over whether to use data gathered by, or cite published studies based on data gathered from, the Nazis in the course of their unethical and horrendous experiments on humans during World War II (Moe, 1984). Moe, K. (1984). Should the Nazi research data be cited? *The Hastings Center Report*, 14, 5–7. Some argue that because the data were gathered in such an unquestionably unethical manner, they should never be used. Further, some who argue against using the Nazi data point out that not only were the experiments immoral but the methods used to collect data were also scientifically questionable. The data, say these people, are neither valid nor reliable and should therefore not be used in any current scientific investigation (Berger, 1990). Berger, P. L. (1990). Nazi science: The Dachau hypothermia experiments. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 322, 1435–1440.

On the other hand, some people argue that data themselves are neutral; that “information gathered is independent of the ethics of the methods and that the two are not linked together” (Pozos, 1992, p. 104). Pozos, R. S. (1992). Scientific inquiry and ethics: The Dachau data. In A. L. Caplan (Ed.), *When medicine went mad: Bioethics and the Holocaust* (p. 104). Totowa, NJ: Humana Press. Others point out that not using the data could inadvertently strengthen the claims of those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened. In his striking statement in support of publishing the data, medical ethics professor Velvl Greene says,

Instead of banning the Nazi data or assigning it to some archivist or custodial committee, I maintain that it be exhumed, printed, and disseminated to every medical school in the world along with the details of methodology and the names of the doctors who did it, whether or not they were indicted, acquitted, or hanged....Let the students and the residents and the young doctors know that this was not ancient history or an episode from a horror movie where the actors get up after filming and prepare for another role. It was real. It happened yesterday. (Greene, 1992, pp. 169–170) Greene, V. W. (1992). Can scientists use information derived from the concentration camps? Ancient answers to new questions. In A. L.

10. Take into account societal-level questions of ethics such as the public's expectations of research. At the macro level, researchers should consider their duty to, and the expectations of, society.

Caplan (Ed.), *When medicine went mad: Bioethics and the Holocaust* (pp. 169–170). Totowa, NJ: Humana Press.

While debates about the use of data collected by the Nazis are typically centered on medical scientists’ use of them, there are conceivable circumstances under which these data might be used by social scientists. Perhaps, for example, a social scientist might wish to examine contemporary reactions to the experiments. Or perhaps the data could be used in a study of the sociology of science. What do you think? Should data gathered by the Nazis be used or cited today? What arguments can you make in support of your position, and how would you respond to those who disagree?

Table 3.1 "Key Ethics Questions at Three Different Levels of Inquiry" summarizes the key questions that researchers might ask themselves about the ethics of their research at each level of inquiry.

Table 3.1 Key Ethics Questions at Three Different Levels of Inquiry

Level of inquiry	Focus	Key ethics questions for researchers to ask themselves
Micro	Individual	Does my research impinge on the individual’s right to privacy?
		Could my research offend subjects in any way?
		Could my research cause emotional distress to any of my subjects?
		Has my own conduct been ethical throughout the research process?
Meso	Group	Does my research follow the ethical guidelines of my profession and discipline?
		Have I met my duty to those who funded my research?
Macro	Society	Does my research meet societal expectations of social research?
		Have I met my social responsibilities as a researcher?

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- At the micro level, researchers should consider their own conduct and the rights of individual research participants.
- At the meso level, researchers should consider the expectations of their profession and of any organizations that may have funded their research.
- At the macro level, researchers should consider their duty to and the expectations of society with respect to social scientific research.

### EXERCISES

1. The ASA website offers a case study of Rik Scarce's experience with protecting his data. You can read the case, and some thought-provoking questions about it, here: <http://www.asanet.org/ethics/detail.cfm?id=Case99>. What questions and concerns about conducting sociological research does Scarce's experience raise for you?
2. The PBS series NOVA has an informative website and exercise on public opinion of the use of the Nazi experiment data. Go through the exercise at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/holocaust/experiments.html>.

## 3.4 The Practice of Science Versus the Uses of Science

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define replication, and be able to describe why it matters in terms of research ethics.
2. Describe what it means to use science in an ethical way.

Research ethics has to do with both how research is conducted and how findings from that research are used and by whom. In this section, we'll consider research ethics from both angles.

### Doing Science the Ethical Way

As you should now be aware, researchers must consider their own personal ethical principles in addition to following those of their institution, their discipline, and their community. We've already considered many of the ways that sociologists work to ensure the ethical practice of research, such as informing and protecting subjects. But the practice of ethical research doesn't end once subjects have been identified and data have been collected. Sociologists must also fully disclose their research procedures and findings. This means being honest about how research subjects were identified and recruited, how exactly data were collected and analyzed, and ultimately, what findings were reached.

If researchers fully disclose how they conducted their research, then those of us who use their work to build our own research projects, to create social policies, or to make decisions about our lives can have some level of confidence in the work. By sharing how research was conducted, a researcher helps assure readers that he or she has conducted legitimate research and didn't simply come to whatever conclusions he or she *wanted* to find. A description or presentation of research findings that is not accompanied by information about research methodology is missing some relevant information. Sometimes methodological details are left out because there isn't time or space to share them. This is often the case with news reports of research findings. Other times, there may be a more insidious reason that that important information isn't there. This may be the case if sharing methodological details would call the legitimacy of a study into question. As researchers, it is our ethical responsibility to fully disclose our research procedures. As consumers of research, it is our ethical responsibility to pay attention to such details. We'll discuss this more in the section "Using Science the Ethical Way."

There's a *New Yorker* cartoon that depicts a set of filing cabinets that aptly demonstrates what we don't want to see happen with research. Each filing cabinet drawer in the cartoon is labeled differently. The labels include such headings as, "Our Facts," "Their Facts," "Neutral Facts," "Disputable Facts," "Absolute Facts," "Bare Facts," "Unsubstantiated Facts," and "Indisputable Facts" (<http://www.cartoonbank.com/1977/filing-cabinets-labeled-our-facts-their-facts-neutral-facts-disputable-facts-etc/inv/116530>). The implication of this cartoon is that one might just choose to open the file drawer of her choice and pick whichever facts she likes best. While this may occur if we use some of the alternative sources of knowledge described in [Chapter 1 "Introduction"](#), it is fortunately *not* how the discovery of facts works in sociology, or in any other science for that matter. There actually is a method to this madness we call research.

The requirement of honesty comes not only from the American Sociological Association's principles of integrity and scientific responsibility but also out of the scientific principle of **replication**<sup>11</sup>. Ideally, this means that one scientist could repeat another's study with relative ease. By replicating a study, we may become more (or less) confident in the original study's findings. Replication is far more difficult (perhaps impossible) to achieve in the case of ethnographic studies that last months or years, but it nevertheless sets an important standard for all social scientific researchers: that we provide as much detail as possible about the processes by which we reach our conclusions.

Full disclosure also includes the need to be honest about a study's strengths and weaknesses, both with oneself and with others. Being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of one's own work can help a researcher make reasonable recommendations about the next steps other researchers might consider taking in their inquiries. Awareness and disclosure of a study's strengths and weaknesses can also help highlight the theoretical or policy implications of one's work. In addition, openness about strengths and weaknesses helps those reading the research better evaluate the work and decide for themselves how or whether to rely on its findings. Finally, openness about a study's sponsors is crucial. How can we effectively evaluate research without knowing who paid the bills?

The standard of replicability along with openness about a study's strengths, weaknesses, and funders enable those who read the research to evaluate it fairly and completely. Knowledge of funding sources is often raised as an issue in medical research. Understandably, independent studies of new drugs may be more compelling to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) than studies touting the virtues of a new drug that happen to have been funded by the company who created that drug. But medical researchers aren't the only ones who need to be honest about their funding. If we know, for example, that a political think tank with ties to a particular party has funded some sociological research, we can take that

11. The principle that enough information should be provided about a researcher's methodological procedures that another researcher, at another time or place, could reproduce the study in question.

knowledge into consideration when reviewing the study's findings and stated policy implications. Lastly, and related to this point, we must consider how, by whom, and for what purpose research may be used.

### Using Science the Ethical Way

Science has many uses. By "use" I mean the ways that science is understood and applied (as opposed to the way it is conducted). Some use science to create laws and social policies; others use it to understand themselves and those around them. Some people rely on science to improve their life conditions or those of other people, while still others use it to improve their businesses or other undertakings. In each case, the most ethical way for us to use science is to educate ourselves about the design and purpose of any studies we may wish to use or apply, to recognize our limitations in terms of scientific and methodological knowledge and how those limitations may impact our understanding of research, and to apply the findings of scientific investigation only in cases or to populations for which they are actually relevant.

Social scientists who conduct research on behalf of organizations and agencies may face additional ethical questions about the use of their research, particularly when the organization for which an applied study is conducted controls the final report and the publicity it receives. As mentioned in [Chapter 1 "Introduction"](#), after graduating from college with a sociology degree, I worked for an evaluation research firm. The firm I worked for is in fact just one division of a larger, nonprofit social services organization. The research division of this organization conducts in-house evaluations of the effectiveness of its own programs (and also provides evaluation research consulting to other, outside agencies). While I never saw any questionable practices with respect to the uses of science while there, the *potential* conflict of interest between in-house evaluation researchers and the employer being evaluated certainly exists. A similar conflict of interest might exist between independent researchers whose work is being funded by some government agency or private foundation.

So who decides what constitutes ethical conduct or use of research? Perhaps we all do. What qualifies as ethical research may shift over time and across cultures as individual researchers; disciplinary organizations; members of society; and regulatory entities such as institutional review boards, courts, and lawmakers all work to define the boundaries between ethical and unethical research.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Conducting research ethically requires that researchers be ethical not only in their data collection procedures but also in reporting their methods and findings.
- The ethical use of research requires an effort to understand research, an awareness of one's own limitations in terms of knowledge and understanding, and the honest application of research findings.
- What qualifies as ethical research is determined collectively by a number of individuals, organizations, and institutions and may change over time.

### EXERCISES

1. Think of an instance when doing science ethically might conflict with using science ethically. Describe your example and how you, as a researcher, might proceed were you to find yourself in such a quandary.
2. Using library and Internet resources, find three examples of funded sociological research. Who were the funders in each case? How do the researchers inform readers about their funders? In what ways, if any, do you think each funder might influence the research? What questions, if any, do you have about the research after taking these potential influences into consideration?