Research Ethics

Martin discusses research ethics in Chapters 4 and 5 of his text. Please read those chapters now.

In recent years psychologists have struggled a lot with the questions regarding what is and what is not ethical to do in psychological research. In fact, many of the classic studies you will read about in your textbook, studies done many years ago, would be considered unethical by today’s standards. Here is a quick summary of the type of issues that have received the most attention:

* **Coercion** -- participation in research should be voluntary. Offering persons $100 to participate could be considered coercive. Asking participants to fill out a survey with a friend could be considered coercive (putting social pressure on the friend). Offering extra credit in a psychology class is considered coercive unless an alternate means of earning extra credit is available.
* **Issues of Privacy** -- most people do not want the results of psychological tests conducted on them to be revealed to others.
* **Deception** -- most people get upset if they find out that the researcher was not truthful with them with respect to things like the purpose of the research. One of my graduate students did a thesis involving the physiological detecting of cheating on an exam. She set up them so that they had an opportunity to cheat but had an apparatus that could tell whether they cheated or not. Of course, she could not inform them before-hand that her study was about cheating, so she told them that it was about the physiology of emotions while taking exams. Because of this deception, the IRB insisted that she not only tell them afterwards about the deception but also allow them, at that time, to have their data purged from the records, even though the data were anonymous. After all, it would not be fair to a cheater to use her data to help develop a mechanism to detect cheating, right?
* **Discomfort or Harm** -- if there is going to be any likely discomfort or harm caused by participating in an experiment, most people would like to know about that before deciding to participate in the experiment.
* **Right to Service** -- if an experimental treatment is expected to yield a benefit, is it ethical to include in your research a control group that does not receive that treatment?

These days most psychological research must be approved by an **IRB (Institutional Review Board)** prior to being conducted. The IRB is charged with assuring that the research is conducted in an ethical fashion. If you would like to investigate the ECU IRB, point your browser to <http://www.ecu.edu/irb/>.

The typical steps taken to assure that there are no serious ethical problem include:

* Gathering and recording the data in ways that preserve subjects’ **anonymity**,
* Obtaining **informed consent** from the research participants, and
* If the research does have **risks**, taking reasonable steps to reduce the amount of harm done

Data collection conducted by students in a class such as PSYC 2210 may or may not be subject to IRB regulations. Apparently such data collection is regulated if it is gathered with an intention to contribute to “generalizable knowledge,” that is, if it is intended to be disseminated beyond the institutional setting and if the results can be generalized beyond the sample.

Informed consent typically involves advising the participants regarding what will take place during the research, any possible harm or discomfort, how their confidentiality will be maintained, and that they can quit the experiment at any time. One interesting question here is “**How does the informed consent procedure affect the behavior of the research participants?**” There is the possibility that the informed consent procedure could bias the results of the experiment.

Another interesting issue if that of conducting research on nonhuman animals. **How can you get informed consent from a laboratory rat**, for example. Some would argue that it is never appropriate to conduct research on a participant that cannot grant consent, such as a nonhuman animal, while others would argue that it is appropriate if it can be shown that the benefits of the research justify any harm or discomfort done to the nonhuman subjects.

**Dehumanizing Language**

Several years ago the folks at the American Psychological Association decided that use of the term “subjects” to describe the research units in behavioral research was dehumanizing (which, of course, is not a problem if the subjects are not human in the first place). Accordingly, they banned the use of that term and instructed us to use “participants” or “respondents” instead. More recently they have changed their minds and now allow us to use “subjects” to describe our research units.

We still, however, need to be sensitive with our choice of words. For example, it is considered inappropriate to use “female” or “male” as a noun when describing a person, unless the range of ages of the person make it incorrect to refer to them as “women and men” or “girls and boys.” Even then it is less problematic to simply use “female” and “male” as adjectives (which is always permissible) – for example, “the female inhabitants of Pingo Pongo were observed to spend much more time in activities promoting group cohesion than were the male inhabitants.

One also needs be careful when describing persons’ ethnic identity or sexual orientation. Words that were politically correct last year might be considered disparaging this year.

**Demand Characteristics**

I think of this as a threat to validity, but Martin discusses it under ethics. Basically, demand characteristics are certain types of circumstances (generally related to the behavior of the researchers) in the research setting that affect the subjects’ behaviors in ways that contaminate the research.

One such circumstance is the researcher asking (“demanding”) that the subject participate in the research. It has been argued that most human subjects are respectful of authority and science and will try to act in ways that will confirm the researchers’ hypotheses. For this reason, researchers often go to great lengths to try to hide their hypotheses from the subjects, but even then the participants may guess at what the hypotheses are, and that will affect their behavior whether or not they guess correctly.

Many years ago, when I was a graduate student here at ECU, I was assisting with the research of one of my professors. We were asking students to complete an task involving anagrams and then giving them false feedback. We wanted to determine how that feedback (and other factors, including personality characteristics) affected the causal attributions they made regarding their success or failure on the task. While administering the anagrams task I noticed in the room one of my high school buddies, Greg. I had not seen Greg in about ten years. Afterward he came up to me and we caught up on what we had been doing in the interim. Then he told me that he and his friend had decided that they knew what this research was about, and, because they were angry about being forced to participate, they were going to do their best to disconfirm the researcher’s hypotheses – this is called the “screw-you effect” – but then he decided that since I was involved in the research they would do their best to answer the questions in a way they though would confirm the hypothesis – the “good guy effect.”

I would like you to read the article “The effect of experimental bias on the performance of the albino rat,” by Rosenthal and Fode. It is cited in Martin and is available online from our library.

**Fabricating Data**

There have been several cases in which it is likely that researchers fabricated the data for the putative research they reported. This seems to be very rare, but also very troublesome. Needless to say, such fabrications set back the progress of science. That said, please note that there is role for data simulation, both in research and in pedagogy, but it is not an ethical problem when the research makes it clear that the data were simulated.

**Plagiarism**

Representing another’s work as being your own is plagiarism. You are probably most familiar with plagiarism as copying the work of another on an exam, quiz, or term paper. It is, however, also plagiarism when you steal another person’s ideas. Plagiarism is easy to avoid – when you want to share with others the writing or ideas that another has shared with you, simply give credit to the original author or thinker by citing her or him. I should add that in Psychology is it considered inappropriate to quote much from others – rather, one should paraphrase – but a citation is in order whether quoting or paraphrasing.

Some instructors have established anti-plagiarism policies to the effect that if the student uses any five words in a row that have been used by somebody else previously then that student is guilty of plagiarism. A few years ago I took such a policy statement and searched the Internet. I found several previously authored documents in there were five or more consecutive words identical to those in this faculty member’s policy statement. I informed her, by email, of my discovery, and asked if she was guilty of plagiarism too. She never replied to me, but I could almost hear her cursing me from miles away.

More recently there have been expressed concerns about “self-plagiarism” – when you use word in a new document that you have previously used in other documents. Personally, I think this is bunch of BS (Bad Science). Suppose that I have developed an experimental technique for manipulating the level of scatophobin in nucleus spurious of my research subjects and I have worked hard to succinctly describe the procedure in the methods section of a research manuscript. Should I waste my time trying to write-up that procedure with different words (and probably less succinctly) when I prepare a later manuscript describing additional research in which I employed that same manipulation? I think not !

When I was a graduate student I conducted some research with male deer mice. The results were consistent with current thinking about the response of animals to members of their own species versus members of a different but similar species. It was published. Later I conducted similar research but this time with female deer mice. The results came out opposite what they had been with the male deer mice. This was unanticipated, but I thought that I was able to explain it in terms of other know sex differences in deer mice. I wrote the research up and sent it off to a journal in zoology. Only a few days later I got a rejection letter telling me that the journal would not publish the research because it was too similar to that I had already published. Thinking the editor had not realized that the results from the female mice were exactly opposite those from the male mice, I wrote back and asked the editor if he had realized that. He wrote back and told me that he would not publish the research because it had been “too easy to conduct.” A few days later I received, from two colleagues of the editor, requests for reprints of my earlier work. I was and still am convinced that these were unethical scientists who were attempting to steal my ideas – deny me publication of my research that was “too easy to conduct” so they could do it themselves and then publish it. I rushed my manuscript into publication in another journal to prevent this plagiarism.

**Falsifying Credentials**

If you are ever temped to pad your vita with experiences you have not had, just don’t do it. How would you feel if you discovered that the surgeon about to operate on you did not actually have medical degree, but was rather an auto mechanic. Likewise, how would feel if your putative mechanic knew nothing about automobiles but was an orthopedic surgeon instead.

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