

Ethical Responsibilities to Participants

As a researcher, your first ethical concern should be to protect the dignity and welfare of participants. This can be more difficult than it sounds, because it can be difficult to anticipate how participants will react to a study. It is usually easy to recognize when someone's physical safety is threatened, but it is often difficult to recognize when a person's emotional well-being is at risk. You have an obligation to avoid any procedures that have the potential to make your participants feel badly. In general, avoid designs in which participants could be humiliated, embarrassed, scared, anxious, stressed, saddened, or discouraged. If your study involves a negative mood manipulation, you have the responsibility to restore participants' moods before they leave.

The complete set of ethical guidelines for psychological research are contained in the American Psychological Association's 2002 Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, available online at <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html>.

Privacy

Part of protecting the dignity of participants is respecting their privacy. Generally, researchers may only observe behavior that is performed in "public," that is, in a space where people expect that they may be observed. There have been some notable exceptions to this policy that may help to reinforce how privacy is related to the protection of dignity. Middlemist, Knowles, and Matter (1976) studied personal space invasion in the men's restroom, specifically, the row of urinals. The authors try to argue that public restrooms are to some degree public, but there is something unseemly about their methods:

The observer used a periscopic prism imbedded in a stack of books lying on the floor of the toilet stall. An 11-inch (28-cm) space between the floor and the wall of the toilet stall provided a view, through the periscope, of the user's lower torso and made possible direct visual sightings of the stream of urine. (p. 544)

Another notable exception to the public space rule is a study by Henle and Hubbell (1938), who were studying egocentricity (the tendency to neglect other people's perspectives) in adult conversation:

...the investigators took special precautions to keep the subjects ignorant of the fact that their remarks were being recorded. To this end they concealed themselves under beds in students' rooms where tea parties were being held, eavesdropped in dormitory smoking-rooms and dormitory wash-rooms, and listened to telephone conversations. (p. 230)

Needless to say, these two studies are examples of how *not* to respect the dignity of participants. In general, you may only observe people when they could reasonably expect being observed.

Confidentiality

In the context of research, concerns about participant confidentiality are concerns about the degree to which personally identifiable data (video, audio, interview, etc.) will be distributed. Participants would likely be concerned if they discovered that their responses on a questionnaire were posted on a website next to their name. The easiest and most common way of dealing with confidentiality is simply to separate any identifying information from participants' responses. For example, questionnaires are typically anonymous – although there may be some demographic data collected (age, sex, etc.), no one will be able to attach a particular set of responses to a particular person.

Video or audio recordings, however, necessarily involve the collection of information that directly corresponds to a person's identity. These materials must be treated with great care so as to protect the confidentiality of participants. If you will be using these methods, you must inform participants about the people who will have access to the materials and how long they will be maintained. Access restrictions range from only the researcher, the researcher and a small team, the academic community, or the world (completely unrestricted). Typically, sensitive information (e.g., testimony about drug use or sexual behavior) is destroyed after some predetermined time (e.g., one year).

When should participants be notified that they may be recorded? Generally, before the recording begins. However, when deception (see below) is used because knowledge about recording will unduly

influence participants' behavior, researchers must disclose the recording after it has taken place (at which time they must give participants the option of destroying the recording).

Informed Consent

To insure that participants' rights are respected, it is essential that they complete a procedure known as **informed consent** before a study begins: Participants must give *consent* to participate after being *informed* about what will be happening. Typically, this involves giving participants a written document that contains a description of the procedures and asking them to sign it. An example informed consent form is given at the end of this document. The necessary elements of the informed consent form are:

1. Identity of the researcher and institution, including contact information
2. Topic of research (what is this *about*?)
3. Description of procedures (what will the participant be *doing*?)
 - a. A statement of how much time the entire procedure will take
4. The possible contribution the research will make to the field
5. Any reasons *not* to participate:
 - a. Risk of physical or emotional harm
 - b. Limits of confidentiality (will the participants' responses be associated with his or her identity? Could this pose a danger to participants, for example if the responses indicate drug use?)
 - c. If there are no significant risks, the standard phrase to use is: "Participation in this study has no known risks, beyond those of everyday life."
6. A statement explicitly informing participants that they are free to discontinue the experiment at any time.
7. Place for participant's signature, date

Free to discontinue: the Milgram obedience experiment. You may be wondering why it is necessary for participants to be explicitly informed that they are free to discontinue at any time. The primary reason for this is a series of experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University in the early 1960s. Milgram was investigating the factors that influenced "destructive obedience" (obedience involving the harming of another person). Participants were told they were participating in a study on the effect of punishment on learning. Each time another "participant" (actually a "confederate" – an accomplice of the experimenter) answered a question incorrectly, they were instructed to administer a shock, which increased in 15-volt increments with each incorrect answer. The confederate, seated in an adjacent room, never actually received any shocks, but a tape recording of confederate reactions to the shocks was triggered by particular shock levels. At 75 volts, he grunts. At 150 volts, he demands to be released. At 270 volts, he screams. At 330 volts, he falls silent. The maximum voltage that could be administered was 450 volts. Almost every participant resisted at 150 volts, but the experimenter responded with a series of scripted "prods" designed to elicit obedience: "please continue," "the experiment requires that you continue," etc. An expert panel of 39 psychiatrists predicted that, under these conditions, less than 0.1% of participants would go all the way from 15 to 450 volts. To the astonishment of everyone, fully 65% of participants did so. Several replications of the study produced similar rates of obedience regardless of the participants' gender, age, race, education, and socioeconomic status. Many participants were visibly upset during the experiment – twitching, stuttering, begging the experimenter to end the study. Remember that although participants were told that they must continue, there were no physical barriers preventing them from leaving. After the experiment was over, Milgram arranged for each participant to have a "friendly reconciliation" with the confederate, in which the participant was reassured that the confederate was fine. Milgram also arranged for 40 participants who had been especially troubled by their experience to be interviewed by a psychiatrist one year after the experiment. The psychiatrist found no evidence of any traumatic reactions, but one participant did report that his wife said, "You can call yourself Eichmann," referring to the Nazi officer responsible for orchestrating the deaths of millions of Jews in concentration camps during World War II. Clearly, some participants were haunted by the knowledge that they *would have* killed another person if ordered to do

so by a person in authority. Milgram speculated that some of the power of the obedience situation was derived from participants' failure to consider that they were free to leave. Milgram's experiment was widely criticized for the stress experienced by his participants, and many of the elements of informed consent (especially the instructions about being free to leave) were implemented to protect participants from the power of the experimenter's authority.

Questionable informed consent. For certain populations, informed consent is problematic either because you cannot be certain that potential participants understand what is being communicated (they are not "informed") or because they are not completely free to decline your offer of participation (they cannot give "consent"). Research with children falls into this category. Typically, parents must give consent for their children to participate. In addition, a child must give his or her own "assent" (agreement) to proceed with the study, and special care must be taken to remind the child throughout the study that he or she is free to discontinue at any time. A second population for whom informed consent is problematic is prisoners. Agreements to study prison populations may be made with prison officials, but the prisoners themselves may feel compelled to participate.

Exemptions from informed consent. Informed consent is a nearly universal feature of research designs. According to the American Psychological Association's 2002 Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, however, some research does not require informed consent:

Psychologists may dispense with informed consent only (1) where research would not reasonably be assumed to create distress or harm and involves (a) the study of normal educational practices, curricula, or classroom management methods conducted in educational settings; (b) only anonymous questionnaires, naturalistic observations, or archival research for which disclosure of responses would not place participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or damage their financial standing, employability, or reputation, and confidentiality is protected; or (c) the study of factors related to job or organization effectiveness conducted in organizational settings for which there is no risk to participants' employability, and confidentiality is protected or (2) where otherwise permitted by law or federal or institutional regulations.

The Use of Non-Human Animals in Research

An often-overlooked population that is typically excepted from the informed consent requirement is the population of non-human animals. Non-human animals are often preferred to humans when research requires precise control over the environment (such as raising an animal in an environment devoid of vertical lines), a large number of observations that would require considerable time sacrifice from humans, or dangerous or harmful procedures (such as the destruction of parts of the brain).

The American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines for the use of non-human animals require that 1) researchers interacting with the animals be adequately trained to handle them; 2) every step possible be taken to minimize discomfort, illness, or pain; 3) painful procedures be used only after all alternatives have been exhausted and the benefits justified; 4) surgery be conducted only using anesthesia and antiseptic procedures; and 5) the killing ("sacrifice") of animals be conducted in a manner that is designed to minimize suffering.

I would add that the weight of the evidence suggests that non-human animals experience pain in a manner that is similar to our own experience. Indeed, it would be difficult to explain how an animal that did not experience pain could survive for long. In my opinion, we have greatly underestimated the costs of non-human animal research and overestimated the gains. Researchers considering non-human animal research that involves pain should carefully consider whether the benefits of the research genuinely justify the suffering that is produced.

Deception

Another important exception to informed consent is the use of deception: the intentional presentation of false information for the purpose of misleading participants about the hypothesis or procedures in a study. Deception is typically used when knowledge about the true purpose of a study would alter participants' responses. For example, participants who are told they will be in a study

concerning obedience may be unusually resistant to any authorities they encounter during the study. The two most important rules concerning the ethical use of deception in research are 1) **participants should never be deceived about any potential risks in a study**, and 2) any deception must be disclosed at the end of the study during a process called **debriefing** (discussed below).

Two of the most common deceptive procedures are **confederates** and **cover stories**. A confederate is an actor, an accomplice of the experimenter who is playing a role as part of the experiment. Usually, confederates pretend to be other participants. For example, in Solomon Asch's research on conformity, participants believed that they were sitting around the table with six or seven other participants. In reality, everyone else was an actor, trained to respond identically so that researchers could observe the effects of a unanimous majority on individual behavior. Sometimes, confederates play the role of a "passerby" – a person who just happened to cross the participant's path. For example, researchers who study helping may use a confederate who "accidentally" drops an armload of books just as a participant is approaching them. In general, confederates are used when researchers want to either standardize (hold constant) or systematically manipulate the appearance or behavior of other humans in the participant's environment.

Two problems with using confederates are: 1) their appearance and behavior is never *exactly* the same with different participants, and 2) repeating the performance with different participants takes up a great deal of time for confederates. To reduce these problems, researchers rely on recordings whenever possible. For example, participants might be led to believe that they are communicating with another person over the intercom, but the responses they receive may be an audio recording. (To reduce the chance that participants will detect the deception, these interactions are usually highly structured, with participants asking predetermined questions and simply listening for an answer). Daniel Batson created a videotape of a person receiving shocks and led participants to believe that the tape they were watching was really a live telecast from a nearby room. In both cases, the recordings provided standardized information of others' behavior and they saved time.

Whereas confederates are an ongoing part of the procedure of a study, cover stories are presented at the beginning. Researchers who use a cover story misstate the true purpose of the study. This is common in research on socially undesirable behavior: obedience, cheating, lying, etc. Typically, the cover stories are designed so they are consistent with the procedures a participant will encounter (e.g., participants in Stanley Milgram's research on obedience were told they would be participating in a study on the effects of punishment on learning, which was consistent with the shocks they would be administering). Another approach to designing a cover story is to use a vague description: "The effect of environmental factors on performance."

There are several potential problems with deception. First and foremost is the moral issue of whether it is ever acceptable to mislead other people. Some researchers are opposed to any use of deception on these grounds, stating that there is little moral difference in lying to participants and lying to loved ones. These critics argue that researchers who claim they "must" use deception simply haven't been creative enough. In addition to this moral issue are some practical issues. Participants may discover the deception during the study and react in unpredictable ways, perhaps just becoming more self-conscious or perhaps taking revenge by deliberately sabotaging your results. Participants who learn of the deception after the study could feel tricked, foolish, or angry. A more subtle consequence of deception is that participants may enter later studies feeling suspicious, which may interfere with the results of that study. Epley and Huff (1998) found that participants felt suspicious even three months after participating in a deceptive study. Researchers who are considering the use of deception should think carefully about all of these potential costs and try to minimize them.

Debriefing

Debriefing, like informed consent, is a procedure that should be a part of almost every study. After the study is completed, the researcher reveals any deception, the hypotheses of the study, and the possible implications of the results (why the study was conducted). The researcher has a responsibility to make participants feel that their time was well spent and that they have contributed to a worthy enterprise. Typically, participants are given a "debriefing sheet" that contains this information as well as the contact information of the researchers and information about how they may learn about the results of the study. The most effective way that I have found of providing participants with information about the results of a study is to give them an address to a webpage which I then construct as results become available. A

sample debriefing sheet is given at the end of this document. The only studies for which debriefing is unnecessary are those for which it is impossible: naturalistic observation, archival research, or field experiments where researchers do not directly interact with participants.

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)

Every institution that receives funding from the federal government must have an IRB – a group of researchers, legal specialists, and others who follow a carefully scripted protocol to review research proposals before they are conducted (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46, Subpart A). IRBs are designed to protect the rights of human and non-human participants. On rare occasions, a researcher at a federally-funded institution will begin conducting a study without obtaining IRB approval. In September of 1999, federal regulators halted all research on humans at the University of Illinois at Chicago because a researcher failed to submit a proposal before beginning. This held up approximately 1,600 research projects, which made a lot of researchers very angry.

Institutions that do not receive federal funding (including over 500 “independent” colleges, universities, and organizations) are not required by law to have an IRB, but they often employ an informal review of research proposals, especially proposals from students. Even when not required by law, it is important for researchers considering potentially questionable procedures to consult with colleagues to obtain an objective assessment of the procedures.

Responsibilities to the Scientific Community

Do not plagiarize. Plagiarism occurs when an author takes credit for the ideas or words of another author. An easy way to reduce the risk of plagiarism is to use citations liberally. Any time you draw on the ideas of another researcher, cite them. This will not only protect you from charges of plagiarism; it may also ingratiate you to the person you have cited. Do not feel as though citations make you look like you don’t have any original ideas. In psychological articles, citations are a *strength*. They make you look as if you have developed some mastery of the field. That said, I have often found that beginning researchers are over-reliant on the exact words of others. Generally, frequent use of quotes indicates that an author does not understand the concepts being discussed. It is usually more effective to paraphrase than to quote. In both cases, citations are appropriate.

Do not make up data. In the August 2001 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP)* there was a very unusual event: the retraction of an article. The journal announced “the data reported in this article are invalid and should not be considered part of the scientific literature of psychology. The responsibility for this problem rests solely with the first author.” Biernat and Crandall (2001) report that the author resigned from her post at the University of Texas at Austin amid charges that she invented data while at Harvard. The charge of fabricating data, while rare, has negative consequences not only on the responsible researcher but on the field as well. Other researchers rely on published results to build their theories. Two lessons emerge from this example: be skeptical (but not cynical) of the results from any single study, and do not be tempted to fabricate data. The general rule is that researchers are responsible for making their data available to other researchers for **five years** after it has been published. This offers other researchers the opportunity to double-check the results.

Costs and Benefits

Finally, it is worth mentioning that all research that involves participants involves some costs to participants. The costs may be relatively minor, such as taking up an hour of their time, or they may be more serious, such as subjecting participants to stressful experiences. In every case, the potential benefits of the research need to be weighed against the costs to determine whether the study should be done. Stanley Milgram’s experiment on obedience subjected people to intense stress, but it also revealed an important lesson about human nature: how easily ordinary people can injure others when ordered to do so by an authority figure. In considering the potential benefits, it is appropriate to ask “What are the consequences if this study is *not* done?” Whether the benefits outweighed the costs to participants in Milgram’s study is debatable, but the important thing to realize is that such a debate is important to have regardless of the study.

Sample Informed Consent Form

This research is being conducted by Dr. Bill Altermatt, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Hanover College. The experiment in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the impressions we form in the earliest stages of getting to know someone. You will watch a brief video clip which shows two people going out to dinner together. After the clip, you will be asked to answer some questions about the people you saw in the video. After you finish answering questions about the video clip, you will be asked to complete a 10-item questionnaire on your attitudes about men, women, and their relationships. Finally, you will be asked a few demographic questions. After you have finished answering all the questions, you will be debriefed.

The entire experiment will not take more than 50 minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide during the experiment is completely anonymous; at no time will your name be associated with the responses you give. If you have any questions about what you will be doing in the study or about the study itself, feel free to ask them now or at any other time during your participation.

If you have any questions after the study, please contact Dr. Bill Altermatt at altermattw@hanover.edu or in room 155 of the Science Center.

I acknowledge that I am participating in this study of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time. Incomplete participation will not result in credit for participating, but I may complete an alternative assignment of equal time commitment in order to receive credit. If I wish, I will be given a copy of this consent form.

Signature

Date

Sample Debriefing Form

The study in which you just participated was designed to measure the effect of payment and polite behaviors on people's impressions. You watched a videotape in which two people were going out for dinner together. Although you only saw one video, there are 4 different versions of this video. There were two possible levels of polite behavior (man polite, neither polite) and two possible levels of payment (man pays, split the cost). We will be testing whether people who see one version reach different conclusions from people who see the other versions. Previous research using a similar videotape found that a man who paid for dinner and acted in very polite ways was perceived as warmer, more intelligent, and (among female observers) more physically attractive than the same man when he did not act especially polite. In contrast, a woman whose dinners were paid for and who received the polite behavior was perceived as less independent than the same woman when she split the cost of the meal and did not receive any special behavior.

Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants until the semester is over. If people know what we're testing before the study begins, they may respond differently, jeopardizing our results.

As soon as the results from this study are available, you can read about them at the following website:

<http://psych.hanover.edu/departments/altermattw/research/videostudy.htm>

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please contact Bill Altermatt in room 155 of the Science Center or at altermattw@hanover.edu. For more information on these topics, we suggest reading:

Glick, P. and S. T. Fiske (2001). "An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary justifications for gender inequality." American Psychologist **56**(2): 109-118.