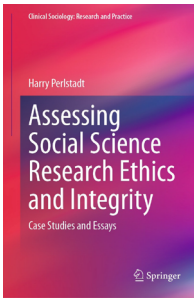


Resources

Book Review: *Assessing Social Science Research Ethics and Integrity: Case Studies and Essays*

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Assessing Social Science Research Ethics and Integrity: Case Studies and Essays

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Published in Springer's Clinical Sociology: Research and Practice series, *Assessing Social Science Research Ethics and Integrity: Case Studies and Essays* is the work of Harry Perlstadt, Professor Emeritus at Michigan State University's Department of Sociology. This scholarly work is concerned with research ethics in the social sciences, focusing on the protection of human participants in social experiments. With two comprehensive essays and a meticulous analysis of six contentious experiments, Perlstadt embarks on a journey to elucidate the complex interplay between ethics and empirical inquiry.

Comprising nine intricately crafted chapters, the book unfolds with Chapter 1, which serves as an introductory exposition on the landscape of research ethics in the United States (US). Chapters 2 and 3 provide insights into the ethical considerations governing research practices within the context of the US. The subsequent six chapters each methodically dissect a pivotal study, with each study being a

harbinger of significant ethical discourse and transformation within the realm of US research ethics.

Chapter 1 presents a historical overview of research ethics in the US. It establishes that the foundational disciplines within the social sciences – anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology – are subjected to various codes of ethics, with some disciplines, such as anthropology, commonly being required to comply with more than one code of ethics. Importantly, Perlstadt identifies that the essential principles that guide ethical research are beneficence, respect for persons, and justice. The broader historical trajectory of social science research ethics is briefly discussed in this chapter. During the 1960s, research ethics were merely concerned with the collection of participant information and not with acquiring the informed consent of participants. The Obedience to Authority experiment conducted by Stanley Milgram in 1963 serves as an example, with a majority of participants in the study complying with an authority's demands to administer potentially lethal electric shocks. By 1979, social scientists held the impression that they were subjected to the same ethical standards as the biomedical sciences. Only by 2018, after revision was made to the Common Rule (the federal regulations of the US Department of Health and Human Services), did the social sciences attain freedom from the constraints of biomedical research ethics standards.

Perlstadt commences Chapter 2 by arguing that trepidations towards the social sciences exist. He presents the argument that social science often evokes apprehension due to its inquiry into fundamental aspects of human existence, including everyday life, organizational structures, and cultural phenomena. Thus, findings that challenge conventional wisdom or contradict personal experiences may provoke skepticism or even denial. Moreover, the inherent nature of social science inquiry may pose a threat to established beliefs, values, and societal institutions. Thus, it is because of the aforementioned that the ethical implications of social science research are of paramount importance. The key focus of social science should, therefore, reside on maximizing the benefits derived from the conducted research while minimizing potential

harms to research participants. However, the regulatory frameworks governing social science research should also accommodate its very distinct characteristics. Drawing from Max Weber, Perlstadt argues that contemporary research ethics frameworks, epitomized by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and Ethics Committees in the US, operate within a bureaucratic paradigm guided by value-rational ethical principles. These bodies are entrusted with the interpretation and implementation of ethical standards.

Ethical standards evolve in response to ethical transgressions. The Nuremberg Code (1947) and the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) are early milestones that outlined ethical standards for biomedical research while subsequent developments, including the establishment of IRBs and the formulation of additional ethical guidelines, further reinforced ethical safeguards. Evolving research methodologies and the proliferation of multisite studies require the ongoing refinement of regulatory frameworks. One such refinement was the 2018 revision to the Common Rule. Challenges in bolstering research ethics, such as inconsistencies in ethical review processes, still persist. To address various ethical research challenges, Perlstadt states that efforts are necessary to foster ethical reflexivity and uphold the fundamental principles of beneficence, respect for persons, and justice.

Chapter 3 presents the second essay of the book which explores police power, decision-making, and the enforcement of research participants' protection. This essay unfolds against the backdrop of the transfer of authority from federal entities to academic institutions and their IRBs. Conceived as collaborative bodies comprised of members drawn from academia's scientific and research spheres, IRBs have assumed the pivotal role of nurturing an environment of trust and enforcing stringent ethical requirements. IRBs are also required to adhere to standardized review procedures, advocating for the widespread adoption of Health, Education, and Welfare research regulations across federal domains. The culmination of these efforts materialized in the implementation of the Common Rule in 1991. IRBs assume the critical mandate of safeguarding the rights and welfare of individuals involved in scientific research. Although grounded in the foundational tenets articulated in the Belmont Report (respect

for persons, beneficence, and justice), IRBs have garnered scholarly scrutiny, often being likened to an ‘ethics police’. Perlstadt posits that while the Belmont Principles serve as a pedagogical instrument, their application in research proposal evaluation is not universally mandatory. The 2018 revision of the Common Rule reflects ongoing efforts to strengthen human subject protections while streamlining administrative procedures, underscoring the dynamic evolution of research ethics frameworks.

In interrogating the characterization of IRBs as an ‘ethics police’, this chapter situates regulatory mechanisms within Max Weber’s typology of legal systems. Weber’s taxonomy delineates four categories of law, with police power epitomizing a convenient mechanism for central authorities to address local concerns while accommodating community norms. Consequently, the human research protection structure assumes a legitimate police power role, aligning with Weber’s concept of substantively irrational law, which prioritizes ethical considerations over formal legal precedent. The decentralized nature of IRB decision-making, informed by ethical principles and contextual nuances, highlights the concept of moral federalism, where local IRBs wield substantial discretion within federal parameters. This decentralized model produces disparities in decision-making across research institutions, which is reflective of the US’ ethos of individualism and regional autonomy. Furthermore, the absence of an independent appeals process within the US human research protection structure diverges from global standards, undercutting IRBs’ credibility. Perlstadt concludes the chapter by suggesting that explicit mandates requiring independent review mechanisms are imperative to fortify the human protections apparatus and enhance IRB accountability.

Chapter 4 explores the first of six controversial studies. It examines the US Public Health Tuskegee Syphilis Study which was conducted on African American men with third-stage syphilis. The study garnered widespread attention for its racist dimensions and ethical lapses. Peter Buxtun, a whistleblower employed by the US Public Health Service, exposed the study’s unethical practices. Despite warnings about potential job loss, Buxtun brought to light

the fact that researchers were merely observing the men without providing treatment, comparing the study to Nazi atrocities. Initially conceived as a joint project with the Rosenwald Foundation in 1929, the study shifted focus to observing untreated syphilis and conducting autopsies after the foundation withdrew support. Most critically, men in a control group that contracted syphilis did not receive penicillin treatment, even though they were in the early stages of the disease where such medication would have cured them. The study's methodology raised ethical concerns and contributed to the enactment of regulations like the Common Rule. The revelation of the Tuskegee Study's 40-year duration prompted regulatory reforms, a successful lawsuit, and a presidential apology.

Chapter 5 explores the 1952 Wichita Jury Study conducted by the University of Chicago Law School to investigate jury behavior. This entailed audio recording simulated juries and actual deliberations. Controversy arose when it was revealed that jury members were unaware of being recorded, prompting legal restrictions on such recordings. The study highlighted ethical issues surrounding informed consent and privacy, spurring legislative measures to protect jury confidentiality. The Wichita Jury Study is a particularly important case for research ethics studies containing sensitive evidence such as jury deliberations. As a consequence, scholars have grappled with questions regarding appropriate procedures and ethical responsibilities required for legal settings. Importantly, the study has informed subsequent legal and ethical frameworks for participant protection.

Chapter 6 examines Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority experiment conducted in the 1960s, which examined individuals' willingness to obey orders from an authority. The experiment, which involved administering apparent electric shocks to participants, raised serious ethical concerns with critiques regarding the psychological harm inflicted on participants and the use of deception being abundant. The research did, however, shed light on human obedience and the potential for authoritarianism to emerge. Milgram's findings challenged prevailing beliefs about obedience

and individual morality, drawing parallels to the evils that transpired in human history, like the Holocaust.

Chapter 7 is concerned with the Tearoom Trade, an observational study by Laud Humphreys conducted in fulfillment of his doctoral thesis. It investigated homosexual behavior in public restrooms in the 1960s. Humphreys' methods, which included covert observation and obtaining participants' personal information without consent, sparked ethical debates. The study raised questions about researcher deception, privacy rights, and the boundaries of ethnographic research. Tearoom Trade serves as a cautionary tale regarding the ethical challenges of studying marginalized communities. Humphreys' study disregarded informed consent and privacy, thus problematizing the acquiring of data through deception. Perlstadt's opinion is that ethnographers face significant problems by virtue of the fact that they have to gain access to a closed subculture and then scientifically study it. He suggests that because of this, preliminary observations are necessary and that, over time, observational data should be supplemented with additional data collection tools such as interviews. Perlstadt also concedes that some deception might be necessary when observing naïve participants.

Chapter 8 presents the Stanford Prison Experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo. It explored the effects of situational factors on behavior, using a simulated prison environment. The participants were university-age males, enacting the roles of prison guards and prisoners. The experiment resulted in abuses being perpetrated by the guards over the prisoners, with the experiment being cut short. Even with abuses being suffered by the prisoner participants, their pleas for help were (for a time) ignored. The Stanford Prison Experiment remains a landmark study in social psychology, but its ethical shortcomings have sparked ongoing debates. Criticism of Zimbardo's methodology and treatment of participants has been crucial in shaping social science research ethics. Zimbardo's study serves as a warning about the potential harm that participants can incur in experimental settings where one party possesses absolute power. Zimbardo even testified as an expert defense witness in 2004

regarding the Abu Ghraib atrocities, further confirming his finding that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, is concerned with the Yanomami controversy centered on allegations of unethical research practices by James Neel and Napoleon Chagnon in studying an indigenous people in South America. The controversy raised questions about informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and the role of researchers in vulnerable communities. While contributing to scientific knowledge, the study highlighted the need for ethical guidelines in cross-cultural research. Neel and Chagnon's actions sparked debates about the rights of research participants and the responsibilities of researchers.

In conclusion, the book's contribution is a very significant one, methodically presenting a history of research ethics in the US along with an exploration of the ethical codes that shaped research ethics in the country. The book's noteworthy contribution is its thorough consolidation of controversial, yet seminal, studies that hold perennial fascination for both fledgling students and seasoned scholars, supplementing these foundational narratives with its own distinctive insights. With its academic prose, the book is tailored for an audience of social scientists and scholars. Its inherent sociological orientation is manifest in Perlstadt's adept utilization of sociological literature to bolster his arguments. While the author's primary target audience appears to be social science readers, the book transcends its niche appeal, offering accessibility to a wider readership. Perlstadt subtly alludes to this broader accessibility, implying that the book holds relevance for anyone with an interest in the realm of research ethics, regardless of their academic background. Despite its scholarly rigor, the book eschews elitist jargon. *Assessing Social Science Research Ethics and Integrity: Case Studies and Essays* merits attention due to its overall excellence and accessibility.

About the Reviewer

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