

PAUL DAVIDSON REYNOLDS

***ETHICS AND  
SOCIAL SCIENCE  
RESEARCH***

PRENTICE-HALL  
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# **ETHICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**

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**ETHICS AND  
SOCIAL SCIENCE  
RESEARCH**

Written in the hope that future generations  
will respect social science research  
and profit from its contributions.

# PREFACE

This book is designed to provide the knowledge and a strategy to facilitate the analysis of moral problems in social science research and applications to practical affairs. The perspectives and approaches of this book are found in the codes of ethics developed by associations representing social scientists (see Appendices), but the relationship between analysis and application is more explicit in the following discussions. Codes of ethics are useful for extreme or trivial cases in which the solutions are obvious; the resolution of intermediate problems—the true dilemmas—requires something more. It is hoped that this book can be of help.

One precaution: Chapter 6 reviews the mechanisms for controlling investigators engaged in research with human participants; these mechanisms include federal rules and procedures and standards embodied in the legal system. While these rules and procedures were current at the time the book was written, they are changing constantly; for any complex or delicate problem, the reader should obtain the most recent information. The official responsible for the Institutional Review Board and liaison with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) should be able to provide timely assistance.

I am very grateful to others for their help. As this work is a condensed and reorganized version of my *Ethical Dilemmas and Social Science Research* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1979), including the use of Exhibits 3, 6, and 12 (appearing in this book as Exhibits 1-2, 2-1, and 1-1), it would not

have been possible without the permission of Jossey-Bass, Inc. Thanks are also extended to the American Anthropological Association, American Political Science Association, American Psychological Association, and the American Sociological Association for allowing their respective codes of ethics to be published in the appendices. Finally, it is time to once again show appreciation to Mrs. Helen Keefe for her excellent and efficient work in typing the manuscript.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## BASIC ISSUES: STRATEGIES FOR RESOLUTION

An adult male, seeking a sexual experience, visits a public restroom in a remote area of a city park. Upon entering, he notices two other adult males; through nonverbal signals he arranges to participate in a sexual act with one while the other serves as a lookout. Over a year later the same man is interviewed by the "lookout" (now disguised). This man has participated in a study that indicates that brief impersonal, homosexual contacts are a regular occurrence for men who otherwise appear typical for their community (Humphreys, 1970).

Immediately after leaving a station, subway passengers notice a man swooning and falling to the floor of the car with blood trickling from his mouth. After several seconds, a bystander stoops to help the fallen person. Someone moves to pull the emergency cord, but he is restrained by another "passenger." The "stricken" man is helped to his feet and leaves the car at the next station. This staged emergency is part of a study that indicates that help is usually provided (80 percent or more of all incidents), that the helper is likely to be male, and that help is more likely if the problem appears to be medical (rather than alcoholic) and not serious (the presence of blood reduces the number of responses) (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972).

Residents of a typical neighborhood receive the accustomed police response to calls for service, although the frequency of patrols (officers cruising in squad cars) is twice the normal rate (which they do not seem to notice). Residents of an adjoining neighborhood receive equally efficient responses

when they request police assistance, although there are *no* patrols in their area (which they do not seem to notice). Both neighborhoods are part of a study of the effect of police patrols on crime rates, being conducted without their knowledge. No difference is found in rates of crime and citizen attitudes toward crime or the police as a result of these variations; following the study, the regular patrol patterns are reestablished (Kelling et al., 1974).

Do these make your blood boil? Some of them may. Though outraged indignation is less common than an instinctive feeling that something is inappropriate, unjust, or not right—people shouldn't do such things. A distinctive feature of all research that involves human participants is a possibility for moral ambiguity. Such concerns, common in social and biomedical studies, usually raise the following questions.

*Is that (the research) the right thing to do?*

Should sociologists be spying on homosexuals?

Should psychologists create fake emergencies?

Should investigators take the risk that crime may increase?

*Is it (the research) good for society?*

Is it important to know more about atypical sexual behavior?

Is it important to have more information about altruism (helping behavior)?

Is it important to know if police patrols reduce crime?

*Are they (the investigators) good people?*

Should anyone deceive another about his or her true purpose?

Should anyone pretend to need help and create anxiety in others?

Should anyone risk the criminal victimization of others?

Such questions may be asked by social scientists before or during a research project or moral observers (participants, citizens, journalists, other social scientists) after research is completed. The questions are not necessarily independent. An investigator may be convinced he is a "good person" if the research is considered good for society; research that benefits participants may be seen as good for society *and* the right thing to do. Equally important, similar types of analysis may be employed in resolving each question.

One strategy to ensure that research is ethically correct is to develop a set of guiding rules or principles (the very word "ethical" implies that explicit standards exist). Almost every major association of social scientists (except for economists) in the United States has developed a code of ethics for research, frequently after a great deal of controversy. However, several features of scientific research and professional societies make it quite difficult to establish a fixed code of ethics; not only are investigators constantly developing new research procedures not covered in existing codes, they are also selecting new phenomena for study. Moreover, the norms and standards of society are constantly changing. The diversity of phenomena and research procedures at any one time is great enough that an explicit, precise code covering all possible research procedures would be complex, voluminous, and prohibitively expensive to develop. Existing codes are therefore very general, consisting of several printed pages, and their application to specific activities is often ambiguous.

The alternative, the focus of this book, is to consider the strategies one might employ to develop a personal judgment about the moral character of a research activity. Three such strategies have been used to resolve moral questions:

- Concern for individual rights, particularly participants’ rights to self-determination (the extent to which individuals are able to control their own destiny) by allowing them an opportunity to give their informed consent to become involved in research.
- Consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of research for the greater society, organized in the form of a cost-benefit (sometimes called risk-benefit) or utilitarian analysis.
- Evaluation of interpersonal relationships; the extent to which the individuals involved (investigators related to participants; participants related to participants) treat each other as people “should.”

The first two strategies were developed to resolve somewhat different, more general, issues: specifically, to justify a political state and to evaluate public programs and legislation. The third strategy, which deals with ideal interpersonal relationships, has been a moral or ethical issue for a long time. Strategies developed for resolving these general issues are also used, often instinctively, to resolve concerns related to research; they are the philosophical basis for the codes of ethics developed by associations representing social scientists.

But strategies for analysis are useful only if directed toward specific questions. Such questions can provide a guide for organizing a moral analysis; those to be used in the moral analysis of research are as follows:

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Effects on Rights                  | 1. What rights of various parties associated with the research activity—participants, investigators, society at large—may be affected? |
| Program/Project Effects            | 2. What are the costs and benefits of the research program and this project?   |
| Participant Effects                | 3. What are the costs (or risks) and benefits for the participants?  |
| Distribution of Effects            | 4. What is the expected distribution of the costs and benefits?  |
| Respect for Rights, Welfare        | 5. How has respect for the rights and welfare of the participants been demonstrated?   |
| Personal Treatment                 | 6. To what extent does the personal treatment of the participants by the investigator(s) approach the ideal?                           |
| Acceptability to Social Scientists | 7. Which social scientist role definitions, if any, would be consistent with the major features of the moral analysis?                 |

The order of the questions is one of convenience; treating all issues in arriving at a final judgment is more important than the sequence. The identifying labels, to the

left of the questions, will be used for reference in discussions of specific types of research.

The remainder of this chapter will review these three orientations for resolving moral dilemmas: respect for individual rights, evaluation of effects, and the personal treatment of others. This should provide a fuller understanding of how these strategies relate to research analysis and important issues.

## RIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Two of the questions selected to guide the moral analysis of research are directly related to concerns for rights:

- |                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Effects on Rights           | 1. What rights of various parties associated with the research activity—participants, investigators, society at large—may be affected? |
| Respect for Rights, Welfare | 5. How has respect for the rights and welfare of the participants been demonstrated?   |

Resolution of the first issue requires an understanding of the nature and types of rights that have developed within society, which is largely a matter of definition. But the resolution of the second is somewhat more complicated; for it is frequently not possible to ensure that all the rights of all participants will be respected (or observed), and it is necessary to demonstrate respect by asking participants to forego some rights. An appreciation of the conditions under which individuals may give up rights requires an understanding of the justifications for them; both will be discussed.

The basic concept of a “right” is something to which an individual may have a “just claim”; all rights are negative or positive (MacCallum, 1967). *Negative rights* are those in which individuals have a right not to be interfered with; they can expect to do “something” without hindrance from others (persons, groups, or governments). “Something” would include the familiar rights of speech, worship, movement (travel), pursuit of happiness (economic well-being), freedom from physical assault, privacy, and the like. Further, if another were to hinder the exercise of such rights, as in preventing freedom of speech (by disrupting a peaceful political meeting), the government would be expected to come to the defense of such rights. *Positive rights* are those in which others have an obligation to help or assist an individual to exercise such a right. A right to a fair and timely criminal trial implies that others (typical citizens) have an obligation to participate; they can be legally compelled to serve as a witness or juror. In advanced societies, rights have been changing status in the recent past; the right to physical health has been changing from a negative right (where government action prevents interference or discrimination in an individual’s attempt to obtain medical care) to a positive right (where government action provides adequate medical care for all).

Two general strategies are associated with justifications for rights. One is



based on a religious or philosophical belief in what “should” be the status of individuals, and the other is based on legal arrangements that reflect experiences with political systems. If a right (such as freedom from physical assault) is found in many different societies and has persisted for some time, this may be used as evidence (1) that a right reflects God’s (either Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or other) intentions, or (2) that it exists in the absence of organized societies or formalized legal systems (that is sometimes referred to as “natural law”) (Olafson, 1961). Another approach, social contract analysis, emphasizes the type of political structure that rational, thoughtful adults would develop if they were to create one for the first time, in the absence of any existing constitutions or models that could serve as a guide. It is generally concluded that such individuals would be willing to forego certain decisions and allow them to be made by a “government” (such as controlling violence or negotiating with other political states) in return for individual autonomy in certain areas of their own lives (speech, travel, assembly, religion, and the like) and the efficient, effective administration of society.<sup>1</sup>

A quite different justification of individual rights is given by those who are committed to the development and maintenance of the political system; this justification appears in the legal history of modern societies.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being based on an analysis of the natural order, religious principles, or idealized origins of society, this argument states that unless some constraints are placed upon those who rule society (kings, presidents, or other sovereigns), they will abuse ordinary citizens whenever there is a clear advantage. Historical evidence shows that such abuse was (and is) a common occurrence. Hence, the “special contract” that specifies the privileges and obligations of rulers and citizens also specifies individual citizens’ rights; this device constrains those in positions of political or government influence (Gough, 1957; Pound, 1957). Such a device is present in the Magna Charta (A.D. 1215), one of the first legal documents that specified restrictions (defined as the rights of the citizens) upon the English king and his administrators. It is also an important feature of the Constitution of the United States, particularly the issues raised in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. Those approving the Constitution were so cautious that they ordered any right not speci-

<sup>1</sup>Such speculation on the origin of political structures is more properly called “social compact analysis” (as in the Mayflower Compact) rather than social contract analysis (Gough, 1957). While the notion that groups of individuals engaged in parliamentary debates to create a fully developed political plan is no longer considered an accurate reflection of the origin of modern societies, it does lead to some interesting analyses (Rawls, 1971). These include the conclusion that the individuals designing the political structure might be more careful regarding the treatment of the disadvantaged since they cannot predict their own future position in society (whether or not they would be capable or disadvantaged); they may wish to organize society in such a way to maximize the benefits (or minimize the risks) for the disadvantaged. This contrasts with the present form of all societies, where there are substantial differences in the benefits and privileges accorded to the capable and the disadvantaged.

<sup>2</sup>It is quite possible that rights developed and defined on the basis of religious or other analyses are eventually incorporated into the legal system as binding upon citizens and rulers alike; nonetheless, the argument that rights come from nature or God is quite different from the one that considers them part of a contract between two categories of individuals.