# Ethical Considerations in Experimental Social Science Research

Discussion led by Nahomi Ichino & Alyssa René Heinze[1]

11 July, 2022

[1]Slides adapted from EGAP Learning Days Online book, written by Jake Bowers, Maarten Voors, and Nahomi Ichino

Ethical considerations in your research

Group activity

Final discussion

# What we'll do in the next hour

- A *quick* intro to ethics in human subjects (especially experimental) research: 10 min
- Small group activity: 30 min
- Final group discussion: 20 min

# Ethical considerations in your research

# Ethical considerations

- Social science research often engages human subjects, about and from whom we collect data.
- Moreover, by its nature, experimental research is *interventionist*.
- Field experiments seek to generate real-life impacts in society, political processes, and economic outcomes. That is, experimenters are humans *changing* the lives of other humans — hopefully for the better, but usually without a direct request from those whose lives are being changed.
- We have ethical responsibilities as researchers and human beings.

# Weighing potential benefits and risks

- We must take great care to weigh the *potential benefits of the knowledge to be gained* and *short and long-term improvements in the lives of individuals and communities participating in the research* against the *potential risks of harm* to those individuals and communities.
- This is not so easy.
  - Whether an outcome is good or bad may depend on one's perspective, making the risk-benefit balance sometimes difficult to assess.
  - We are prone to significantly overestimating the benefits of knowledge — so we must be cautious and have outside checks.
  - A better life for some people may imply a worse life for others.

# Considerations

- How would you feel if you were a research subject in your study? In the control group? In the treatment group? A relatively high-status member of the community? A relatively low-status member of the community?
- Interventions in social, political, and economic processes could change who has power, which has impacts beyond your research.
  - Example: Should avoid interventions that could change the result of close elections? Should researchers change such election results?

# Core tenets of research with human subjects

- Researchers must respect subjects'
  - Privacy
  - Autonomy
- Basic principles in the Belmont Report:
  - Respect for persons
  - Beneficence
  - Justice

# Informed consent

- The **default** is that researchers should first obtain the informed consent of subjects. This requires that subjects have the:
  - Capacity to consent to participation in the study
  - Freedom from coercion in deciding whether to participate
  - Comprehension of risks and benefits of the research
  - Freedom to withdraw from the study at any time
- A good general rule: Think about the consent process from the subject's perspective.

# Anonymity and confidentiality

- The **default** is anonymity (with all identifying information destroyed after the study), as it provides the most protection to subjects.
- Sometimes anonymity is not possible. But note that researchers' promises of confidentiality to subjects can be undone by court orders.
- For example: Boston College and oral history tapes of Northern Ireland's Troubles (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-27238797).

# Power dynamics and vulnerable subjects

- Certain people — children, prisoners, others in vulnerable positions without power — may not be, or feel, able to understand the risks and benefits or to refuse participation.
  - But we must be aware of power dynamics more generally. It may feel difficult to refuse to cooperate with donors or authority figures.
- If the study can be meaningfully conducted with a less vulnerable population, it should be.
- We require higher standards of potential benefits *to* the vulnerable populations being studied.

# Some institutional checks exist...

- An Institutional Review Board (IRB) or other Research Ethics Committee may review your plans for direct interactions with human subjects for data collection.
- In some countries, the ethics review board will be housed in a ministry of technology/science and be more used to dealing with medical research than social science research.

# . . . but the primary responsibility is with you

- There is no central authority that determines whether your interventions are ethical in a broader sense.
- It is always worth putting yourself in the shoes of your research subjects — both those whom you think will gain and those whom you think will lose from any given intervention.
- Beyond basic human subjects protections reviewed by research ethics committees like IRBs, it is up to the larger community of researchers to develop and enforce standards.

# Designing your intervention

- Do not use interventions that we expect would harm subjects relative to what would happen without the intervention ("standard of care").
- Do not involve more people than necessary for the research.
- Do not make the intervention stronger than necessary for the research.
- Do not provide false information. Avoid deception.
- Partnerships: You should report your involvement in the design of the intervention.

# Group activity

# Ethical dilemmas in experimental research

- Break into small groups (3-4 people)
- Read the vignette and instructions on the worksheet
- Discuss your responses and fill out the worksheet over the next 30 min

# Final discussion

# Group responses

- Which version of the vignette (A,B,C,D) did your group find the least permissible, and why?
- The most permissible?
- For which vignette was your visceral reaction the most different from your considered reaction, and why?
- What are the main themes that came up in your discussions on the ethical considerations of these vignettes?