**Discussion: 10 questions about ethics to consider in field experiments.**

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**Abstract**

This guide raises ethical questions that researchers should consider when engaging in field experimental research. Although this appears in the methods guide series, it is not prescriptive like a typical methods guide because ethical decisions tend to involve more, often competing, principles, and are heavily influenced by context. Nevertheless, this discussion starts from a position that researchers as a profession share fundamental values of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, first codified in the Belmont Report by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Services of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. These ethical principles provided a framework to help researchers decide how to carry out their research. Because they were developed primarily for medical trials, they can be difficult to apply to field experiments. This guide proposes ten questions around ethical principles and practices that experimental social scientists can ask themselves before launching experimental research projects to better adhere to the aspirational principles of ethical research.

1. Does the research weigh reasonably foreseeable potential harm and benefits?

The most important ethical standard for researchers, from both a legal and moral standpoint, is that the benefits of the research must outweigh the costs in order for it to be ethical. The Belmont Report, which is the cornerstone of most legal frameworks on ethical treatment of human research subjects, including those governed by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at many universities and hospitals, calls this a principle of beneficence.

Beneficence implies that research should strive to do no harm, a standard shared with the medical and humanitarian sectors. However, in practice this is very hard to attain. Few interventions that are potent enough to have some benefits also have no risk of harm. As a result, the standard that is used in practice is that the potential benefits of a research project must outweigh the potential harm.

Even this standard is difficult to implement. Answering this question requires us to define how to weigh the costs and benefits of different groups against each other. While most would agree that the research subjects are the group whose costs and benefits are most important, they are not the only group with a stake in the research. In most cases, research subjects put themselves at risk of some harm, such as time lost, discomfort, or more serious risks, in order to contribute broader benefits to society through the research process. However, some of the most noxious examples of unethical research involve inflicting harm on research subjects in order to arguably help society at large. The Belmont Report introduces the standard of justice to argue that the benefits of research must accrue to the same groups that pay the costs. This is typically put into practice with respect to societal groups defined by race or nationality, rather than the specific group of subjects who participate in the study.

In short, researchers must make judgments about how much potential harm to subjects and others is justified by the potential benefits to those groups, and whether those costs and benefits are distributed equitably. While IRBs typically focus on the costs and benefits only to subjects (narrowly defined) and society, others argue that it is also important to consider the costs and benefits to two other important research audiences: the data collection team and the discipline ([Humphreys 2015](https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/wp2015-018.pdf)).

Ultimately, although research projects are reviewed and guided by IRBs, the responsibility to make a judgment about the costs and benefits lies with the researchers and the broader research community. IRBs rely on researchers to communicate the potential costs and benefits and weigh their implications for different groups. IRB review is therefore not a substitute for thoughtful consideration of this tradeoff by researchers and consumers of research.

1. Does the research minimize the potential costs?

In addition to making a cost-benefit tradeoff, ethical researchers try to minimize any potential costs. There are some common costs to subjects in social science research, such as subjects’ safety, emotional discomfort or trauma, and lost time. Researchers must try to minimize these and put systems in place to track and mitigate them. Although some solutions have become standard practice (for example, providing referrals to counselors to help subjects who become traumatized), it is important that these systems are tailored to the specific context and have significant input from local partners in the case of research in foreign environments.

In addition, researchers collecting data, especially on sensitive topics such as criminal or stigmatized behavior, must build systems to protect subjects from violations of confidentiality. This requires careful thinking both about the technological aspects of data storage (network security, encryption, etc.) as well as the legal structures that could be used to compel researchers to breach confidentiality. In general, if any sensitive data is being collected, the researcher should make data collection anonymous by not collecting or destroying any links between the data and the subject’s identity unless there is a very good reason not to do so.

However, researchers should also consider the costs of their research to other groups, including the data collection team, the discipline, and society. Researchers working in the developing world often send teams out into settings where they face harm from accidents, sickness, or violence. These risks must factor into the cost-benefit analysis, and researchers must carefully set up systems to keep their data collection teams safe. This is discussed in more depth in point #5.

Finally, researchers must minimize the potential harm to society as a whole. For example, a number of studies use “audit” designs that involve sending actors or fake messages to see how decision-makers will respond to study discrimination or responsiveness. In some cases, the decision-makers (who are unaware that they are not interacting with a real person) invest time into their response that they would otherwise spend pursuing their own interests or meeting the needs of real people. Audit designs might even make decision-makers less likely to respond to constituent requests in the future if they expect to get fake requests as part of research projects in the future. Researchers running these studies must carefully consider whether the drain on public resources is justified by the potential benefits that the study might offer and try to minimize and monitor their costs ([McClendon 2012](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/dtingley/files/spring2012.pdf?m=1360070641); Malesky 2016).

1. Does the research maximize the potential benefits?

Ethical research also takes steps to maximize its potential benefits to both subjects in the study and broader groups in society. Common direct benefits in social science research include the pleasure of discussing experiences, participating in behavioral games during surveys, voicing one’s opinion, etc. Indirect benefits can come at the local, national, or international level as the results of the research are disseminated and used to influence policy by informing future interventions or communicating the needs of the communities under study.

The ethical directive that researchers should maximize benefits has two other implications for researchers. First, it implies that researchers should disseminate the findings of their research and share their data with policymakers when it might be useful. Influencing policy usually requires an investment of time into activities such as developing relationships with policymakers and preparing non-technical presentations of research findings.

Second, it implies that researchers need to do high-quality research. High-quality research both adds to the existing body of knowledge and is internally valid such that it comes to unbiased conclusions. Practices like good research design, pre-registration, and multiple comparisons corrections help ensure that conclusions are unbiased. It is much harder to assess whether research adds to the existing body of knowledge. In theory, this implies that there are some diminishing returns to additional research on the same topic. However, on many topics in the social sciences we only have a handful of experimental studies, which means that replications and extensions into new contexts are extremely valuable.

1. Does the research take stakeholders’ views of randomization seriously?

Many researchers see randomization, such as a public lottery, as an inherently equitable way to divide scarce resources because everyone in the sample has an equal chance of accessing the benefits. However, there is evidence from specific contexts in which the potential participants do not see randomization as fair ([Haushofer, Riis-Vestergaard, and Shapiro 2015](https://www.princeton.edu/~joha/publications/Haushofer_et_al_Randomization_2015.pdf)). In addition, randomization has significant implications for implementers, who often want to maintain the ability to provide the service that they judge most effective to specific participants (Gueron 2002).

Ethical experimental research takes implementers’ and participants’ views of randomization seriously to try to maximize the perceived fairness of randomization as an allocation mechanism. There are several factors that may influence the perceived fairness of randomization. First, the perceived effectiveness of the intervention can be important. Treatments that can potentially save lives such as HIV prevention or youth gang reduction programs may be seen by implementers or communities as too important to randomly assign. Second, in some cultural contexts where gambling is prohibited for religious or legal reasons, randomization by lottery may have a social cost. Finally, the preexisting division of resources can affect the perceived fairness of randomization.

Views on randomization should be elicited and taken into account in implementation to minimize this potential social cost. For example, people with the greatest need can be guaranteed access to the intervention and excluded from the experimental analysis as long as a sufficiently large population remains for the experiment. Using a second intervention or a placebo instead of a pure control can also make randomization more acceptable in cases where implementers or community members don’t want to create large inequalities in the outcomes of treatment and control subjects. Using a public lottery can increase transparency of the randomization process ([Dionne, Harawa and Honde 2016](http://www.amazon.com/Ethics-Experiments-Scientists-Professionals-Experimental/dp/1138909165)). Finally, in contexts where denying anyone the intervention seems unjustifiable, randomizing the order in which the program is rolled out (often called a “stepped-wedge” design) can still allow you to experimentally study the short-term impacts of the intervention.

1. Does the research put the data collection team at significant or unnecessary risk?

Researchers often depend on collaborators, including service providers, local experts, and data collection firms, to help design and implement experimental studies. For example, to evaluate an information campaign against electoral violence in Nigeria, Collier and Vicente (2014) worked with the NGO ActionAid to implement the intervention, and a team of surveyors to collect pre- and post-treatment data, and a team of journalists to track violent events. Nevertheless, IRBs rarely consider the interests of these collaborators when they weigh the costs and benefits of the research. There are numerous benefits to this, including improvements in the quality of the research questions and data, exchange of skills and knowledge, and financial benefits to local research institutions and skilled workers. When working with local researchers, adequate and timely payments, respectful management practices, quality training, and recognition through certificates and letters of recommendation can have a huge impact on the economic prospects of members of the data collection team. Principal investigators should maximize the material and non-material benefits of their studies for their team members, particularly when working in low-income contexts.

Researchers who run field experiments, even if only the data collection components, end up in the often unfamiliar position of being the employer or principal of research teams. In these situations, researchers can be legally or morally responsible for some of the actions of the teams that they operate. Making plans for contingencies such as accidents or illness with your team (or, if you subcontract to a partner organization, making sure that their plans are cautious and logical) can help avoid problems that could have dire consequences for people working on your project. Although risks to team members should be minimized and avoided, it is also important recognize risks that do exist and put contingency plans in place.

In addition to common hazards like accidents and illness, social science research may have two additional costs for research partners like survey firms and enumerators. First, there may be psychological costs from working on sensitive or depressing topics. To minimize these costs, care must be taken to monitor and address secondary trauma in your data collection team by setting up support systems and discussion within the team or referral to counselors ([Paluck 2009](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/228342818)). Second, it is important to remember that our local research partners often remain in the community long after the foreign researchers are gone. Researchers working in foreign contexts must be thoughtful about how what you make public about your research reflects on them, and give local partners flexibility in how public their participation is.

Making contingency plans and setting up systems to monitor for problems on the data collection team can be time consuming. However, there are more than just ethical reasons for taking these precautions. Ultimately, taking care of your research team by creating good working conditions is also one of the best ways to get high-quality results.

1. Does the research break the law?

In some cases experimenters directly intervene in social and political processes. When experimenters are responsible for the intervention, they should understand and follow relevant laws. University offices of the general counsel can be helpful resources for researchers trying to understand certain areas of the law. When working outside of the U.S., however, university counsels may not be sufficient. In one of the EGAP Metaketa projects testing how the provision of information to voters affects vote choice in Mexico, the researchers consulted with a local lawyer to make sure that their intervention didn’t break any relevant electoral or criminal laws. They then sent copies of a letter from this lawyer explaining the relevant laws out with their implementation teams to address any potential questions ([see here for more information](http://egap.org/content/common-knowledge-relative-performance-and-political-accountability-0)). Precautions like this are important both from a reputation-management perspective and for the safety of your implementation and data collection teams on the ground.

In many contexts, partnerships with organizations that work on the issues being studied can help avoid accidentally or intentionally violating laws. Partner organizations can both bring operational and substantive experience, and may be willing to share some or all of the responsibility for the intervention. Even if partners don’t take full responsibility for the intervention, having local endorsements from bodies like electoral commissions, trusted NGOs, or local elites (that can again be carried by your field staff to increase their credibility) can make implementation run much more smoothly.

This can get tricky when studies challenge the power of elites. For instance, in authoritarian contexts or for studies on corruption, laws may be used to stymy research. There is ultimately no good way for researchers to judge what is a “legitimate” vs. illegitimate local law. However, it is also true that allowing, for instance, abusive regimes to stop research with restrictive regulations may prevent research from improving the lives of people most in need of assistance. Many researchers can exploit legal loopholes, but this is more based on practicality than principle, and must still be done in a way that does not put subjects at an unreasonable risk of harm. Some experiments can also be done in online environments to study dynamics in autocratic states (see [Lu 2016](http://www.amazon.com/Ethics-Experiments-Scientists-Professionals-Experimental/dp/1138909165) for a longer discussion of ethical research in an authoritarian regime, or [King, Pan and Roberts 2013](http://gking.harvard.edu/files/censored.pdf) for an example of an online experiment).

1. Can people refuse to participate?

Researchers working with vulnerable populations must be extremely careful to minimize coercion during a study. In addition to prisoners and children, who are often in positions of relative powerlessness that make them less capable of freely giving consent, race and economic status can create power imbalances that lead to coercive situations when potential subjects are asked to give consent. This problem is particularly salient in research with poor subjects that carries monetary payments. For the very poor, even small payments may put them in a position where they feel they cannot refuse to participate although the research may carry significant long-term risks.

When researchers directly pay participants, a practice that is commonly used to create incentives for behavioral measures, payments should be calibrated to be fair but not coercive. In addition, researchers should take care to ensure that participants have accurate beliefs about the potential consequences of refusing participation in the research are. If the research team is thought to be associated with a service provider, potential participants may believe that they will lose future benefits from the service provider even if that is not the case. This perception can be minimized by having obviously different groups providing the intervention and collecting outcome data, stressing that potential participants will lose no benefits if they refuse to participate during the consent process, and tracking these perceptions.

The same dynamics can be at play with your data collection team. For this reason, ethical research creates a culture where potential problems are monitored and can be raised. Particularly in low-income countries, power differentials can create work environments where problems with the research protocol don’t get raised. For example, data collection teams might be asked to work in a neighborhood that they know is unsafe (but the foreign researcher does not) and not feel empowered to speak up about the problem out of respect or concerns about job security. Actively soliciting input from your team and responding positively to critical feedback helps protect subjects and researchers, and improves the quality of the research.

1. Can people give informed consent?

In order for risk to be ethical, research that puts subjects at more than minimal risk should typically include informed consent. Subjects should voluntarily agree to participate after receiving all the relevant information about the study. Informed consent is important because ethical research should respect the autonomy of research participants by giving them the choice of whether or not to participate. The Belmont Report sets standards for what information research subjects need to make an informed decision about participation, including the research purpose, procedures, benefits and risks, measures to protect confidentiality, and contact information.

However, the type of consent required by IRBs doesn’t apply to all people affected by social science studies, experimental or otherwise. Yet in virtually all research, the boundaries between subjects and society are murky. For example, a non-experimental study that does not conduct interviews or analyze identifiable personal data from human subjects can have large downstream effects by influencing policy, yet currently faces no expectation that it will obtain consent from potentially affected people. Similarly, in a field experiment, current IRB review would consider the risks and benefits to people directly affected by an intervention caused by researchers but not those indirectly affected by the treatment, although the spillover effects of interventions can be considerable (for an empirical example of the spillover effects of cash transfers, see [Haushofer, Reisinger, and Shapiro 2015](https://www.princeton.edu/~joha/publications/Haushofer_Reisinger_Shapiro_Inequality_2015.pdf)), or by the dissemination of the findings.

Ultimately, the limits of researchers’ responsibilities, and by extension who should have the opportunity to consent or refuse to participate in the research as per the principle of autonomy, is an area of active debate. Although downstream effects are not specific to experiments, some have argued that researchers running field experiments in political science have an ethical responsibility to weigh the risks and benefits of the political consequences of their treatments and the dissemination of their findings (Gubler and Selway 2016, p172).

Several considerations affect whether informed consent is ethically required, and from whom. First, IRBs will often grant exemptions to the requirement that researchers obtain informed consent if the research involves no more than minimal risk, the exemption would not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects, and the research could not be practically carried out without the exemption ([45 CFR 46.116](http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/45-cfr-46/index.html" \l "46.116)). Second, in some cases partnerships with service providers can be used to split up responsibility such that researchers are not responsible for the downstream effects of the intervention that they study (see #9 for a longer discussion). These considerations are important as they allow for large-scale studies with significant value to occur that would be impossible to do if they had to obtain consent from millions of people (here are examples of experiments testing how [mailers](http://isps.yale.edu/research/publications/isps08-001" \l ".VvwopxIrKRs) and a [Facebook module](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v489/n7415/full/nature11421.html) affect voter turnout).

There have been calls for researchers involved in studies that put subjects at more than minimal risk to participate in an effort to better adhere to the ideal of respect for persons in field experiments by innovating ways to obtain consent. There are various forms of consent that can be applied in field experiments. [Humphreys (2015](https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/wp2015-018.pdf)) has a thorough discussion of how different forms of consent emphasize different types of autonomy. In practice, researchers can consider getting consent from a random sample of participants, from representatives of the participants, or post-hoc in debriefing sessions. This is an active and exciting area of discussion and innovation in research practice.

1. Has the researcher structured partnerships to delineate responsibility and preserve independence?

Partnerships in which researchers and implementers split up roles and responsibilities are key to many field experiments. There are two big ethical implications of how partnerships are structured. First, partnerships should be structured in a way that maintains the objectivity of the researcher. Partnership agreements should specify that researchers are free to interpret and publish the results in an independent way regardless of the results of the experiment. In addition, when experiments are used partly as a way to hold implementers accountable for achieving results, management and financial structures should be set up such that the data collection team is not reporting to or paid directly by the implementers that they are evaluating.

Second, partnerships can be used to split up responsibility for aspects of the experiment. In many cases, NGOs, political parties, or state agencies take full responsibility for interventions, leaving researchers responsible for only data collection and analysis. Nickerson and Hyde (2016) argue that a researcher’s responsibility should be measured against a counterfactual, such that the researcher’s ethical obligations are limited to what he or she caused to occur. In their words, “If an NGO, foreign government, or other third party will pursue the intervention independently, then the relevant (ethical) counter-factual comparison is between a world in which the treatment occurs and a world in which the treatment occurs and its causal effects are (at least in principle) better understood” (p199).

In some cases, researchers can take advantage of random assignments of programs that existed prior to the research project, which clearly limits the researcher’s ethical responsibility to data collection rather than the provision of the service or randomization. For example, researchers studying the effects of cash transfer programs in Mexico had no influence over the program but merely leveraged the random assignment implemented by the government ([de la O 2012](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00617.x/abstract); [Imai, King and Rivera 2016](http://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/progpol.pdf)).

In other cases, researchers create contemporaneous partnerships with service providers that clearly delineate responsibility. For example, [Fang, Guess and Humphreys (2015)](http://www.macartan.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/20151210.pdf) partner with the City of New York to study the city’s interventions to deter housing discrimination. In this case, the researchers helped the city randomize its existing efforts to deter and measure discrimination and were only responsible for providing design input and analysis. (One important caveat to the partnership structure is that operations on the ground should remain somewhat integrated to enable researchers to observe implementation. Researchers will often embed program associates with technical training into partner organizations to make sure that implementation goes as planned, although there can be a fuzzy line between implementing and monitoring implementation in practice.)

However, there is an active debate over whether partnerships can really take all responsibility for the intervention and its outcomes from researchers. For one, it can be difficult to structure partnerships in a way that puts a complete firewall between the research and the program. In developing countries, researchers often come with connections to funders and prestigious universities that give them significant power over local partners, even if the researchers do not actually control the budget.

Furthermore, even if their impact in the intervention is limited to randomization, there should be limits to how little responsibility researchers can take. Nickerson and Hyde (2016) argue that it is not ethical for researchers to participate in interventions that obviously violate people’s rights, even if that intervention would have happened in the absence of the research. By participating in a manifestly undesirable program, researchers can increase its efficacy or lend an air of legitimacy that could increase its impact. Ultimately, researchers should both structure partnerships carefully, but also be careful to adhere to the standards of ethical citizenship as well as those of ethical research and not get involved in interventions that are reasonably likely to have a negative impact.

1. Is the researcher contributing to debates about appropriate ethical standards?

One of the main points of this list of guiding questions is that just because a research project is IRB-approved does not mean that it is ethical, and it is up to the research community to discuss the ethics of individual studies and how better to adhere to a set of shared ethical principles (Zechmeister 2016). The IRB system was not designed for social science experiments, particularly field experiments. For one, IRBs are dependent on researchers to think through and disclose the risks and benefits of their research project. More importantly, the ethical framework that they have adopted is focused on a narrowly defined group of subjects based on an idea of research from medical trials. Social science research, particularly field experiments, has many stakeholders, including direct participants, people indirectly affected by interventions, the data collection team, and other researchers.

Over the past few years, there have been several scandals caused by social science field experiments. In many of these cases, the basic requirements of IRBs have either been met, or if they were violated those violations were not the main source of public outrage. High-profile cases involving faking data, impersonating the state, or influencing people’s moods through social media violated different ethical expectations than those adopted by IRBs.

Some have argued for a conception of research ethics that is more similar to the ethical framework of a professional guild that tries to maintain positive relationships with various audiences than a medical trial ([Humphreys 2015](https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/wp2015-018.pdf)). Zechmeister argues that ethical research “involves consideration of whether a particular study’s protocol could be viewed as insensitive or offensive in such a way as to invite criticism and backlash to a degree that harm is incurred on future generations of potential research subjects or scholars” (2016, p256). Indeed, the consequences of loss of trust in a discipline can be huge: recent research on the Tuskegee syphilis study suggests that it may have had significant negative effects on the health of African-American men by decreasing trust in healthcare providers ([Alsan and Wanamaker 2016](http://www.nber.org/papers/w22323.pdf)).

The discussion over what are the appropriate ethical standards for social science research has grown over the past few years. On issues like faking data, the profession has clearly identified the ethical standards that serve our collective interest. However, on many other questions including pre-registration, multiple comparisons corrections, and the limits of the consent requirement, social scientists are still debating what the appropriate ethical framework is, and which principle should take precedence in various situations. Participating in this discussion, and in teaching and training other researchers on topics of ethics, is an opportunity and a challenge for researchers who aspire to conducting ethical research themselves.

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1. Thanks to Kevin Arcenaux, Graeme Blair, Albert Fang, Susan Hyde, and Rick Wilson for comments. All opinions and errors are the author’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)