Social Science Research Ethics: Historical and Philosophical Issues

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Social Science Research Ethics: Historical and Philosophical Issues

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The ethics of social science research is a relatively new field, emerging only in the middle of the 20th century. Although there have been several books written on the topic (e.g., Diener & Crandall, 1978; Kimmel, 1988, 1996; Reynolds, 1979, 1982; Sieber, 1992), there is no unanimous consensus about its fundamentals. What is the ethics of social science research about?

Ethics

Ethics can be conceived to consist of several areas. (1) *Descriptive ethics* studies how people actually behave and what ethical values they actually hold. This area belongs to empirical social science. (2) *Normative ethics* is concerned with the questions: How should an individual behave; what properties are valuable or good? (R. Kitchener, 2008). In short, whereas descriptive ethics studies the "is" side of the is-ought distinction, normative ethics studies the "ought" side. (3) *Meta-ethics* asks questions about the meaning of ethical words, the logic of justifying moral decisions, the reality of moral properties, and so forth. (4) Finally, *applied ethics* uses principles and insights from normative ethics to resolve specific moral issues in concrete and particular settings (e.g., medical ethics, business ethics). Social science research ethics is thus an example of applied ethics (K. Kitchener, 2000).

Traditionally, ethical positions have been divided on questions of normative ethics and of what normative ethical principles one should follow. Of course, everyone has his or her own personal values and norms, but the question is, "Which values or norms should be relied on in making a decision? Which personal moral norms and values are really good or adequate ones to hold? Which ones are rationally defensible?"

For example, researchers need to be tolerant when studying how and why people act as they do (American Anthropological Association [AAA], 2006). But this does not necessarily mean that researchers should agree with the values of the people or culture they are studying. Furthermore, there are some values social scientists ought not to hold—for example, torturing research participants or sexually exploiting them. In short, the basic normative question is "What are the ethical values that social scientists ought to hold, and how can they be justified?"

Social Science Research Ethics

In the context of social science research, there are two fundamental ethical questions: What is the ethically proper way to collect, process, and report research data? How should social scientists behave with respect to their research subjects? (The second question has received the most attention.)

There appear to be three sources for answers to these questions: professional codes of ethics, federal guidelines, and general ethical principles.

First, virtually every social science has a professional code of ethics (AAA, 2006; American Political Science Association, 1998; American Psychological Association [APA], 2002; American Sociological Association [ASA], 1999). Many social scientists appear to think that such codes of ethics are sufficient for answering the ethical questions that arise when they conduct their research since these codes prescribe and proscribe certain values and ways of acting. But ethical questions remain: Are such codes themselves ethically justified? What happens when one belongs to more than one professional society and one finds conflicting advice from these divergent codes? Furthermore, issues arise that the codes do not cover. For example, take the issue of doing research on sexually transmitted diseases and discovering that a subject has AIDS but has not disclosed this to his partner nor is he using condoms. Considering that the sexual partner is placed at risk, the researcher is confronted by the potentially lethal consequences of the subject's behavior. In cases like these, sociologists are urged to balance the promise of confidentiality with other obligations in their ethical code (ASA, 1999). Often it is unclear, as it is in the above case, whether or how ethical codes apply.

It would be reassuring if ethics codes solved all such conflicts, but they don't. As the profession develops, new situations and arenas of research arise. Since ethics codes are revised only periodically, new ethical challenges remain unaddressed until the next revision. Consequently, social science researchers need to understand the foundational ethical principles on which their professional codes stand, how to apply these in concrete situations, and how to critically evaluate their own conclusions.

A second source of ethical rules is found in federal guidelines (see Chapter 7, this volume). These federal mandates specify what is permissible and what is not. But again, are the federal guidelines warranted from an ethical point of view? What happens when such guidelines conflict with professional codes of ethics or one's personal value system?

Finally, there are ethical principles. Even if one does not believe in common or universal moral principles, there are several widely cited accounts of general ethical principles that govern biomedical research, psychiatric ethics, and psychology. In addition, there are general accounts of ethical principles governing social science research. These principles can be used to answer ethical questions arising in research, even if the more narrowly formulated professional codes of ethics and professional guidelines do not. At least, that is what we argue: The social sciences need a general set of ethical principles governing their behavior. We suggest a five-level model, involving particular behavior, ethical rules, ethical principles, ethical theory, and meta-ethics.

Historical Overview

Before suggesting such a model, however, we need to briefly address the issue of why social scientists are (or should be) concerned about research ethics. What has happened historically to engender such interest

on the part of the various social scientists, professions, and governmental agencies?

The contemporary concern with the ethics of social science research has several historical roots: (1) as an extension of biomedical ethics, which was a reaction to the Nazi atrocities uncovered during the Nuremberg Trials; (2) as an indigenous moral concern within several of the social sciences, a concern that partly was fueled by controversial cases in the social sciences; and (3) as a general (philosophical) concern about research ethics.

Biomedical Ethics and Federal Regulations

As noted above, one of the most important historical antecedents of social science research ethics was biomedical research ethics. First, there was the Nuremberg Code of ethics, which set forth morally acceptable and unacceptable conduct with regard to medical research with humans. Next, there were several, now famous, cases of controversial biomedical research that came to public attention (Katz, 1972): the Thalidomide Drug Tragedy (in 1961), the Jewish National Hospital cancer study (in 1965), the Willowbrook hepatitis study (in 1966), and the Tuskegee syphilis study (in 1972). Subsequently, it was disclosed that there was controversial research performed by the U.S. Government and universities funded by it—the notorious radiation studies, the MKUL-TRA studies, and so forth. The upshot of this development was the creation of a set of federal guidelines for research on humans. The first was set forth in a report of the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service in 1966 (PPO #129). This, in turn, led to the establishment of institutional review boards (IRBs) in 1971 and 1974. The 1974 National Research Act authorized the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research to formulate the ethical principles that should govern the conduct of biomedical and behavioral scientists performing research on humans—the Belmont Report (1978). (See Childress, Meslin, & Shapiro, 2005.)

How does this history relate to social science ethics? From the beginning (1966), the behavioral sciences were included in the guidelines—first in the Surgeon General's revisions (in 1966 and 1969) to his original 1966 comments and then in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services) guidelines in 1968, 1971, 1974, 1979, 1981, and 1984.

It has always remained unclear, however, what *behavioral science* meant in this context and precisely what kind of research was considered to be ethically debatable. Was it the result of the deception studies of the 1960s, the biomedical studies involving behavioral control (e.g., psychosurgery; drug studies; behavioral modification programs performed on prisoners, veterans, children, the mentally committed, and the aged), and/or a national concern about data banks and the invasion of privacy? These questions have never been thoroughly examined.

Internal Ethical Deliberation

Insofar as social scientists received funding from the government, they were required (at least initially) to

abide by the federal guidelines set forth in IRB procedures. A second source underlying the emergence of a social science research ethics involved the internal history of the various social sciences. Beginning in the 1940s, several social sciences became aware of the need to develop a set of ethical rules to govern their disciplines. This need was magnified as a result of the recognition of several controversial social science research studies: the 1953 Wichita Jury Trial (Katz, 1972), the 1960 Smallville USA study (Vidich & Bensman, 1960), Milgram's (1974) study of obedience, the Project Camelot (Horowitz, 1967), the New Jersey Negative Income Tax Program from 1968 to 1972 (Kershaw & Fair, 1976), 1970 Tearoom Trade study (Humphrey, 1975), and Zimbardo's prison study (Zimbardo & White, 1972). These studies stimulated social scientists to reflect on the ethical foundations and implications of their research methods. Partly as a result of this, most social sciences formulated professional codes of ethics.

Philosophical Ethics

Third, several individuals saw the need for a general set of ethical principles that would cover social science research. The Belmont Report (1978), for example, set forth the principles of beneficence, justice, and respect, providing the philosophical basis for federal guidelines concerning institutional review. It was, however, directly tied to biomedical ethics and said virtually nothing about the social sciences. The most famous attempt to construct a set of general ethical principles governing biomedical research was made by Beauchamp and Childress (1979). Although the Belmont Report and Beauchamp and Childress provided basic sources for constructing a general account of biomedical ethics, neither spoke directly about social science research ethics. Many books have been written about the ethics of a particular social science, the most frequently is psychology. Most of these are focused on ethical issues in clinical and counseling psychology, with psychological research being given a much less central role. Anthropology has produced fewer general works on the ethics of anthropological research and sociology virtually none.

What then about a general account of social science research ethics, one applicable to all social science research? Although there have been several books that have attempted to do this (e.g., Diener & Crandall, 1978; Kimmel, 1988, 1996; Reynolds, 1979, 1982; Sieber, 1992), what is lacking in most of these accounts is an adequate philosophical foundation. In most of these works, for example, there are discussions of confidentiality, informed consent, deception, harm, and so on, and there is the mandatory ritual in many of them of citing standard philosophical theories of ethics—Kantianism, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and so forth. But, with the exception of K. Kitchener (1984, 2000), how these theories relate to issues, say, of deception was not clearly spelled out, so that the connection between these abstract ethical theories and practical issues is not very apparent. Several of these general accounts, many of the specialized works, and at least one professional code of ethics indicate the need for middle-level ethical principles—for instance, principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, or beneficence. This would suggest a tripartite level of ethical theory, something that Beauchamp and Childress (1979) explicitly adopted and an approach that several other general accounts of ethical theory adopted—for example, Fox and DeMarco (1990) and Resnik (1998). Given the prevalence of this approach, we believe that it is sufficiently widespread to be termed "the standard or received model;" others call it *principlism.* Here, we explicitly adopt this model (K. Kitchener, 2000), which was partially adopted

in the 2002 revision of the American Psychological Association Code of Ethics. We believe that, with suitable revisions and qualifications, it has the potential to become the standard model for general social science research ethics.

A Five-Level Model of Ethics

With the goal of providing a basis for ethical decisions, the material that follows first distinguishes between two planes of moral thinking: the immediate plane and the critical evaluative plane (Hare, 1981). Second, it suggests that the ethics codes and more general ethical principles such as "do no harm" constitute the foundations for the critical evaluative level of reasoning. Last, it offers suggestions for decision making when ethical principles conflict.

The model has five levels: The lowest level is that of *particular behavior (action) and ordinary moral judgment*. The second level is that of *ethical rules*, which govern the decisions and actions of the first level and begins the critical evalauative level. Each profession has its own set of rules by which its members may educate new professionals and, in some cases, judge the action of researchers as ethical or unethical. The third level is *ethical principles*. These are more general than moral rules and, in turn, provide the justification for them. The next level is that of *ethical theory*. Here are the traditional theories of normative ethics, theories of obligation that propose a general account of how one ought to act and what things are worthwhile or good: utilitarianism, deontology, virtue theory, contractarianism, natural law theory, natural rights theory, perfectionism, the ethics of care, and so forth. Finally, at the fifth level is *metaethics*, exploring the meaning of ethics.

Figure 1.1 diagrams this model. At the lowest level, judgments and actions are based on information about the problem and our ordinary moral sense. Our ordinary moral sense is based on a combination of what we have learned about being moral over a lifetime and our moral character. In ideal circumstances, it predisposes us to act in morally appropriate ways and leads to sound ethical choices, but in ambiguous or confusing cases, it may not. When ordinary moral values fail to provide guidance or when called on to evaluate or justify ordinary moral judgments, the components of the critical evaluative level can be called on to help in decision making. The critical evaluative level is composed of four tiers of increasingly general and abstract forms of justification. If the first tier does not provide insight for the issue at hand, the second can be consulted, and so on.

Figure 1.1 A Model of Ethical Decision Making
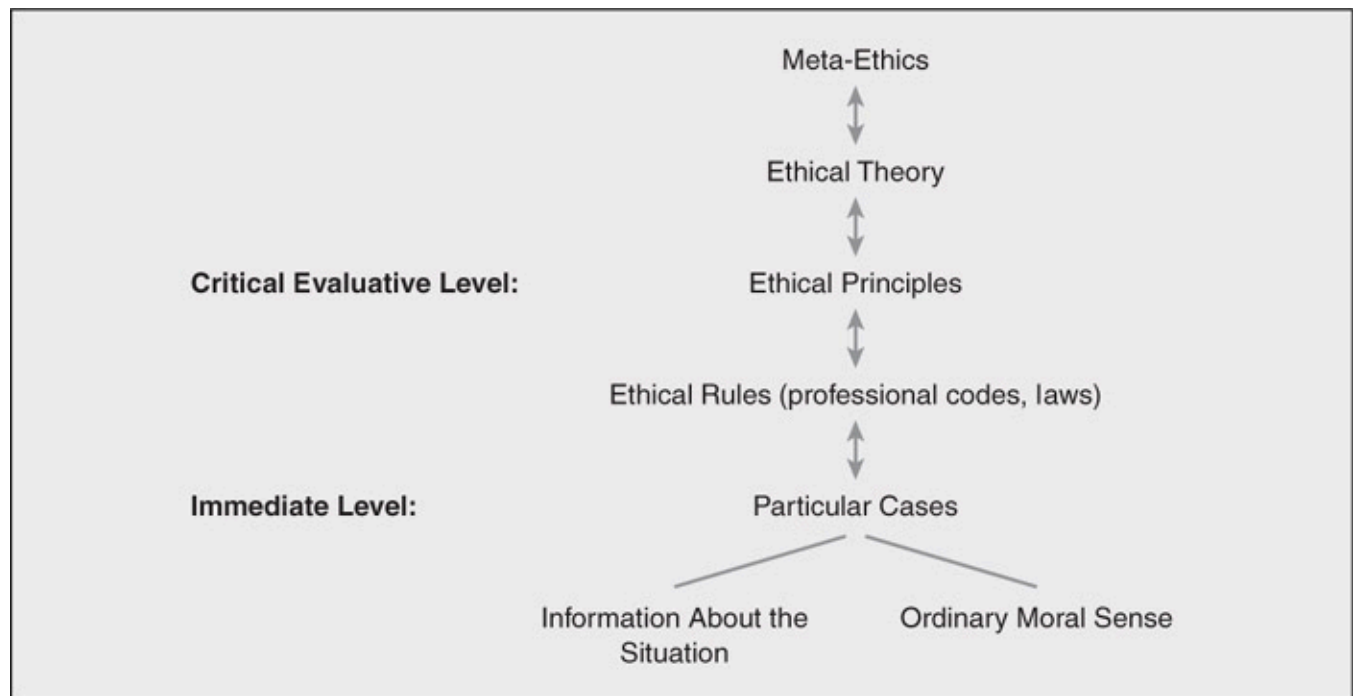
Ethical rules, such as those stated in the ethical codes, comprise the first tier. These ethical codes are grounded in foundational ethical principles, which comprise the second tier. The problems stemming from the inadequacy of professional codes may sometimes be resolved by reference to these higher-level principles. Principles are more general and fundamental than ethical rules or cases; foundational ethical principles may thus provide a more consistent framework within which cases may be considered. In other words, they may help researchers think about what to do when ethics codes are silent. Furthermore, they can provide a rationale for the choice of items in the code itself.

While slightly different sets of foundational principles have been suggested, those that seem central to thinking about ethical problems in social science research are beneficence (do good), nonmaleficence (do no harm), respect for persons (individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and those with diminished autonomy need protection), justice (be fair), and fidelity (keep promises, don't lie, be faithful). These five principles articulate distinctions that are used in ordinary moral discourse and articulate core ethical norms that are central for social science research.

On the other hand, foundational principles themselves may conflict and offer contradictory moral advice. Researchers might be faced with deciding whether to break the confidence of a participant to protect the physical well-being of someone affected by the participant's behavior. The facts of the case may be clear, but the social science researchers' ordinary moral sense might fail them. At the first step, the critical evaluative level, the decision may be grounded in the ethical codes that give the researcher permission to break confidence in order to protect others from harm. If asked, this rule might be justified by the principle of allowing no harm to come to others.

If someone challenges this judgment and points out that breaking confidence destroys trust and forces the social science researcher to break a promise, such as to keep information confidential, social science researchers must be prepared to reason further about the problem. Ethical theory could be consulted, and a decision might be justified on the basis of something like the Golden Rule: In other words, act in such a way toward others as you would wish them to act toward you or others you love. The decision might also be made from a utilitarian perspective of doing the least amount of avoidable harm.

Finally, conflicts about ethical principles and ethical theory may require a higher-order reflection on the meta-ethical level. Here, considerations may be brought to bear to assist in the clarification of which ethical theory seems more relevant and plausible in this context.

Level 1: The Immediate Level of Moral Reasoning (Particular Cases)

People have ethical beliefs and emotional responses to problems that result from what they have learned about what they ought and ought not to do from their parents, teachers, and society. In other words, individuals have an immediate, prereflective response to an ethical situation based on the sum of their prior ethical knowledge and experience. In addition, as they grow older and become more educated, they begin to develop the capacity to reason about their moral beliefs. As that capacity matures, their ability to understand moral problems becomes more complex (Rest, 1983). Thus, prior learning and the complexity of their reasoning provide the foundation for their ordinary moral sense. This ordinary moral sense is, for example, the basis on which a professional is outraged when a researcher seriously abuses a research subject.

However, there is a second component of the immediate level of moral reasoning that is often ignored in discussions of moral decision making—assessment of the information available. An erroneous understanding or misperception of the events that are occurring and their consequences for the people involved can, and often does, lead to poor moral choices.

Ordinary Moral Sense

As already noted, under ideal circumstances, an individual's moral character provides the foundation for her ordinary moral sense and includes her beliefs about her ethical responsibilities. These immediate moral beliefs are critical to everyday ethical actions. In fact, as researchers develop their designs, their moral character may be more important than a particular set of ethical rules or principles. Under most circumstances, for example, a researcher does not need to be told that he or she should not fabricate results. It is an ethical assumption that is an intrinsic part of what it means to do research. In other cases, for example, when deciding whether to continue an experiment in light of ill effects to a participant, there may be little time for conscious and explicit reflection.

It is to our ordinary moral sense (common morality) that, we believe, some are referring to when they suggest that in the face of difficult ethical decisions, people should fall back on their own moral values or conscience.

However, it is not difficult to establish that our conscience may not be sufficient. As already noted, in some cases the situation may be so unusual that one might have no sense of what direction to take. But, in addition, the ordinary moral sense of some people cannot be trusted to lead to good ethical decisions. In other words, not everyone has moral intuitions that lead to defensible ethical choices. We would never argue, for example, that Hitler's ordinary moral sense was as valid as that of Martin Luther King.

As professionals mature, consider the ethical problems that they encounter in research, and critically reflect on them, their ordinary moral sense and common morality ought to become more sophisticated. Those moral values they learned as they were growing up and through their professional education will be supplemented by a deeper understanding of both their professional roles and their obligations. However, for this to occur, they must engage in thoughtful reflection on the ethical problems they face and on the underlying moral values that can enlighten their decision making. Some of this can be done by reading and understanding the professional code of ethics and using the code as a way to expand their ordinary moral standards.

Information About the Situation

To act ethically, social science researchers also need clear information about the situation. Relevant information may range on a continuum from some that is quite clear-cut to some that is open to interpretation. Sometimes researchers make ethical errors because their understanding of specific circumstances or details about the issue is incomplete or erroneous.

Level 2: Ethical Rules

For social science researchers, the first resource in evaluating tough ethical decisions ought to be their ethics codes. They attempt to bring together the cumulative wisdom of the profession about acting morally when doing research. Basically, they formulate a set of action guides researchers must follow and ideals that researchers should strive to follow. These rules should provide answers to many of the everyday ethical questions that social science researchers have and provide a standard against which others, both in the profession and outside it, can judge their actions. For some social sciences, for example, anthropology, the code serves the function of socializing and educating new individuals into the field. For others, for example, psychology and sociology, the codes are also used to adjudicate claims of unethical behavior. Generally, the rules establish a threshold of behavior below which the conduct of research should not fall.

While one might wish that an ethics code embody a "moral point of view," other forces may act to shape it. For example, the development of ethics codes was partially driven by the need to protect professions from federal regulation.

Typically, codes address issues such as the standards of confidentiality, the nature of informed consent, the privacy of information gathered, limits on deceiving participants, risk-benefit evaluation, and dual relationships with participants. On the other hand, codes fail to address important ethical concerns such as issues of truth telling and promise keeping.

Despite the criticisms, ethics codes continue to make an important contribution when social scientists are struggling to identify how to be ethical when doing research. They provide one level of ethical justification for taking or not taking certain actions, allow the profession to reprimand those who transgress beyond its guidelines, and can promote a sense of professional trust and loyalty. To return to a point made earlier, firm moral rules, such as those explicated in the professional codes, are particularly important when social science researchers are tempted by their own weakness or by the weakness of others.

Level 3: Ethical Principles

We have argued that when researchers' ordinary moral sense fails them, they may need to critically evaluate their decisions. The first step in this critical evaluation involves ethical rules. But when rules are inadequate or unclear, researchers ought to turn to ethical principles, such as nonmaleficence and beneficence, to help them frame the issue from a moral point of view. The principles suggest that each person and each problem that the social scientist is evaluating ought to be considered from a perspective that would offer respect for people's rights and dignity, including their privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy, and that each relationship into which a social science researcher enters should be characterized by integrity, including being honest and fair. Similarly, they suggest that when social science researchers enter into professional relationships, high priority should be placed on contributing to the welfare of those who might benefit from their work and avoiding harm to others.

Ethical principles act as general norms that provide a rationale for the moral rules in ethics codes. These principles—nonmaleficence, beneficence, autonomy, fidelity, and justice—are derived from the common morality that undergirds the practice of social science. When social scientists are conducting research ethically, these are the implicit principles they share. Similarly, they appear to be the principles that tacitly guided the practice of ethical social science researchers prior to the writing of the first ethical codes. In this sense, they provide the foundation or justification for all subsequent codes, including the current ones. If, for example, a standard was written that advocated or led to injustice, we could judge it to be a poor standard.

Nonmaleficence

Nonmaleficence means "Do not cause others harm." It finds its roots in the history of medical practice. Although popularized as *primum non nocere* (above all, do no harm) and attributed to the Hippocratic Oath, it does not occur there in that form or in other places in the Hippocratic corpus. Instead, the sentiment of not harming patients can be traced back to ancient times and has been recognized by modern ethicists as central to medical ethics.

In general, the duty to not inflict harm on others includes neither inflicting intentional harm nor engaging in actions that risk harming them. In other words, it forbids certain kinds of activities, in contrast to the principle of beneficence, which suggests that there are certain positive obligations, such as helping others.

The principle of nonmaleficence need not be considered absolutely binding if it is in conflict with other

moral principles, such as in the case of self-defense, where one's own right to life is being violated. On the other hand, many ethicists (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001; Frankena, 1963; Ross, 1930) suggest that, all other things being equal, not harming others is generally a stronger ethical obligation than benefiting them. Returning to the concept of role obligations, if the focus of psychology or sociology is to promote human welfare, harming another would not only prevent achieving of this goal, it would also thwart it. In other words, if social science researchers must choose between harming someone and benefiting them, the stronger obligation could be summarized as "Help others, but at least do not harm them."

The problem with the standard "Do no harm" is that the concept of harm is vague and ambiguous. What constitutes harm, for example, when distinguishing the discomfort and stress that are frequent temporary side effects of participating in research from the long-term harm that sometimes is the outcome? The principle of nonmaleficence leads to ethical concerns such as how much discomfort is justifiable in research and whether it is justifiable to use high-risk research procedures.

Beauchamp and Childress (2001) pointed out that the concept of harm needs to be distinguished from the justification of harm, meaning that just because harm occurs does not mean that it is morally wrong. Sometimes harm may be justifiable although regrettable. The short-term harm or discomfort that sometimes accompanies research can probably be justified, especially if the participant entered the study freely and was informed of the risks. As a result, it is unlikely to be defined as unethical.

The position taken here is that as the risk and magnitude of potential harm increase, ethical prohibitions and limits on the research procedure also increase. However, the risk of harm must also be balanced with other ethical principles.

Beneficence

Beneficence means to do good or benefit others. The purpose of social science research is to contribute to the health and welfare of others by increasing our knowledge. In fact, most codes explicitly state that the goal is to promote the welfare, understanding, and protection of the individuals and groups under study.

The principle of beneficence has two aspects (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989). The first requires acting in ways that further others' well-being. For example, the Preamble of the Ethical Principles of the Psychological Code of Conduct begins with the assumption that the profession will "develop a valid and reliable body of scientific knowledge based on research" and that research is used to "improve the condition of both the individual and society."

The second characteristic of beneficence obligates researchers to balance the potentially beneficial consequences of an action against the potentially harmful ones (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). Unfortunately, in a world as complex as it is today, there is often a price to pay for accruing benefits. This issue may be most familiar to social scientists who work with IRBs. They must evaluate whether the benefits that may follow from a proposed research project outweigh the possible negative consequences of the research.

Doing good for others, just like not harming them, has its limits. Many people want the freedom to choose their own course for their lives even if others do not think that their choice is a good one. If beneficence was accepted as the primary ethical principle, a scientist could always trump an individual's wishes as long as the scientist were acting in the person's best interests, even if it meant deceiving him or her.

Respect for Persons

This principle is based on the assumption that others should be treated as autonomous individuals. Autonomy means self-rule "while remaining free from both controlling interference by others and personal limitations, such as inadequate understanding, that prevent meaningful choice" (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001, p. 58). Generally, autonomy has been understood to include both freedom of action, doing what one wants to do with one's own life as long as it does not interfere with similar actions of others, and freedom of choice, making one's own judgments. It has two aspects. First, it includes the right to act as an autonomous agent, to make decisions, to develop values, and so on. The second follows from a reciprocal responsibility. If people wish to be treated autonomously, they must treat others in the same way. This reciprocity presumes a fundamental respect for the rights of others to make choices even when their beliefs may appear to be mistaken, unless their choices infringe on the rights of others.

In psychology, respect for autonomy as a moral principle has sometimes been confused with autonomy as a personality construct. Feminist authors such as Gilligan (1982) have, for example, suggested that as a personality type, autonomy is conceptualized as separateness and individuation. They argue that it may be a characteristic of the development of many men but not of women. The development of many women is characterized by a greater concern for attachment and relationship. Similarly in the multicultural literature, authors (particularly in anthropology) have argued that an emphasis on autonomy reflects a bias toward an individualistic perspective that may not be appropriate in collectivist cultures (Christakis, 1996).

The commitment to informed consent in social science research derives from respecting autonomy. By requiring social scientists to inform research participants about aspects of the research that might influence their willingness to participate, it safeguards their right to make choices about their own life.

Autonomy, and therefore informed consent, assumes that individuals are competent to make decisions. Macklin (1982, p. 337) pointed out that, on the one hand, it would be ethically unacceptable to violate individual freedom and interfere in others' lives against their will if they are competent. On the other hand, it would be equally unacceptable to allow "harm, destruction, or even death to befall an innocent helpless human who is unable to make a reasonable choice." Thus, social scientists have a particularly strong obligation to protect people who may not be fully competent by phrasing consent in a way that is intelligible.

It should be noted that there are no absolute criteria, including psychological or legal ones, for determining competence. Age plays a critical role because in the average person it is closely linked to cognitive development and cognitive decline (see Chapters 31 and 32, this volume). This is an important consideration for social scientists who work with adolescents and college students since they may not be fully competent to

choose to participate in research even though legally they may be of age.

Fidelity

The principle of fidelity is at the core of the fiduciary relationship between social science researchers and research participants. The Oxford English Dictionary offers a helpful description: it involves the qualities of faithfulness or loyalty and, second, of honesty and trustworthiness.

The principle of fidelity seems especially critical in the social sciences because issues such as honesty and promise keeping are basic to trust. While trust is vital to all human relationships, it is particularly vital to the researcher-participant relationship. This relationship involves an implicit contract that sets up certain role obligations for each. As an example, research may be invalidated if students believed that scientists made a practice of lying to them. Similarly, if research participants made a habit of falsifying the information that they gave to scientific investigators, social science research would be for the most part impossible. Lying, deception, and failure to be trustworthy have serious consequences for all professionals. They destroy faith in the researcher and in the benefits that social science can offer to the public. If lying and deceit were perceived as the norm, research participants would ultimately be suspicious of the professional's motives and would feel no obligation to be truthful in turn. This is one reason why deception in research is so ethically troublesome (Diener & Crandall, 1978). Furthermore, it breaks the researchers' responsibility to be truthful.

Although confidentiality and informed consent can be understood as deriving from the rights of autonomous persons, they can also be understood as obligations that researchers incur when they enter into relationships with research participants based on fidelity. Contracts between researchers and consumers typically include the promise of confidentiality. Failure to keep that promise destroys the trust necessary for human, much less professional, relationships.

Justice

The principle of justice has less to do with the individual relationship between the social science researcher and the research participant and more to do with how to distribute goods and services in the human community. This is a deeply critical social issue since science has been criticized for focusing on white males as participants and then assuming the results to generalize to women and people of other races and color.

Issues of justice arise, according to some philosophers, because in society there are conflicts of interest over limited goods and services and because human benevolence is limited. As a result, to live together with minimal strife, people must develop rules and procedures for adjudicating claims and distributing goods and services in a fair manner. The problems associated with proportioning goods and services are called issues of distributive justice. In social science, they involve at a minimum how the benefits and burdens associated with the social science research ought to be distributed—in this case, how the information derived from the research is used and how the burden of participating in the research is shared. It is based on the principle of justice that most social science research codes forbid social science researchers to unfairly discriminate based on characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, and so on.

There are those who may ask why social science researchers should be concerned with issues of justice at all. In answering the question, Rawls (1971) argued that reasonable people must be committed to justice by the fact that they are engaged with others in activities designed to promote their common interests. If they expect others to be fair and respect their interests, they must treat others fairly in return. He suggests that a concern with fairness is a requirement of people engaged in a society that assumes social cooperation.

Generally, social scientists ought to have a commitment to being "fair" that goes beyond that of the ordinary person. It would be inconsistent with the commitments of social science research to focus their efforts only on particular groups, such as the white middle class, and condone or promote unfair treatment of others.

Level 4: Ethical Theory

About the first three levels, there is considerable agreement in the standard model (see Figure 1.1): ethical rules (e.g., informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, dual relationships, and conditional deception) ground particular moral decisions; and ethical principles (e.g., autonomy and beneficence) ground moral rules. Such a view is found in the Belmont Report (1978), Beauchamp and Childress (2001), K. Kitchener (2000), and many others. But it is at the next level—ethical theory—that advocates of the standard model disagree. Originally, Beauchamp and Childress (1979, p. 5) suggested that ethical theories (e.g., utilitarianism, deontology) ground ethical principles, both in the sense of justifying them and in providing guidelines when ethical principles conflict (although in their latest publication [Beauchamp & Childress, 2001], they no longer hold this view). This view is also present in our model and in several other versions, although once again it remains unclear precisely how ethical theory relates to ethical principles; our own view is that ethical theory does not algorithmically entail ethical principles but rather functions as an heuristic aid in reflecting on ethical principles.

Although individuals may disagree about the precise justificatory role ethical theories play, there is widespread agreement that higher-order theoretical principles are useful and sometimes necessary in moral reasoning. But which ethical theories are necessary and/or sufficient in relation to the lower-level ethical principles such as autonomy and beneficence? Here there is room for considerable disagreement. For reasons of space, certain views will be excluded from discussion. *Ethical egoism* (one should always act to benefit only oneself) has not seemed to be a viable ethical principle to most ethical theorists. The same is true of theological ethics (one should act as God or scripture mandates). Several individuals have advanced "anti-ethical theory" views: Nietzsche's perfectionism, Marx's socioeconomic account of class morality, and Freud's psychoanalytic account of ethical principles. These accounts, although interesting, are not directly relevant to social science research ethics and have not been particularly influential in the field. The same can be said for postmodernist ethics (see Chapter 2, this volume).

Historically speaking, *natural law theory* (*natural rights theory*) is the view that ethical obligations, moral standards, and one's rights are somehow a part of the natural order (including the nature of the person). There is an objectively existing moral order, either as a part of human nature or (indirectly) as given to us by

God. Human nature is essentially rational (and/or social) and hence provides the basis of morality and our natural human rights. Natural law theory and natural rights theory are closely related and are still prevalent in the thinking of many people (e.g., in the Nuremberg Code).

In ancient times, natural law theory was opposed to the radical social conventionalism of the Sophists and Skeptics. A less radical form provided the basis for *contractarianism*, the view that moral standards, human rights, and justice are based on the hypothetical agreement individuals are assumed to make to certain kinds of social, political, and moral norms or conventions. There are two contemporary versions of this view. The most famous modern representative was Thomas Hobbes (1651/1994), who set forth the modern version of the social contract model, a hypothetical account (or thought experiment) of the emergence of social norms. According to Hobbes, humans originally can be imagined to exist in a state of nature, in which their behavior is governed by pure self-interest. In such a state, life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" as individuals compete for scarce goods. Individuals would come to see the advantage of forming larger social groups and creating institutions such as the government and the law, whereby individuals would agree to give up some of their rights in exchange for a more secure life where a sovereign power would provide security.

A second version of this view is sometimes called (Kantian) *contractualism* (Rawls, 1971). Rawls's *original position* was similar to Hobbes's, but Rawls suggests constraints that operate to restrict one's agreement. One of these is that of the *veil of ignorance*, in which one does not know what position one would occupy in society and one then chooses what norms of justice should exist in society. Rawls assumes that it would be rational for individuals to choose those norms that are, in fact, fair and just. This position is thus a combination of contractarianism and the Kantian universalizability principle. Given the centrality of issues of human rights and of justice in contemporary social science research ethics, a view like Rawls's has been deeply influential.

An ethical theory that has always been important is *virtue theory*. According to Aristotle (1989), moral humans are those who have good character. They have developed their innate moral faculties as a result of practice, a good family and social environment, and feedback from other morally good agents. To become good, one must learn how to act in a morally proper way, thereby creating appropriate moral traits (or virtues) such as wisdom, honesty, courage, bravery, and so on. Our function as human beings is to become rational individuals, thereby attaining a state of well-being and flourishing. This occurs, Aristotle insisted, only if one has a proper social and political setting; if one does, then one can be expected to make good judgments in one's life and hence be trusted. This was the assumption made by most individuals during the 1960s about physicians and the kind of research they performed: They could be trusted to behave in a morally proper way because they are virtuous. However, as a result of biomedical research in the first half of the 20th century, in Nazi Germany and in the United States, this assumption was questioned. Consequently, external ethical review was mandated, encapsulated in current codes of ethics, governmental regulations, and external review by IRBs.

According to *utilitarianism* (Bentham, 1789/1996; Mill, 1861/1979), the moral acceptability of an action is determined by its consequences. If the results are good (e.g., are pleasurable or bring happiness), these results determine if the action is right. However, one has also to consider the negative consequences of

the action for everyone involved. One calculates the positive and negative consequences for everyone, which determines the goodness of the action. This at least is the view of *act-utilitarianism*—that action is morally right that produces the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals. Later, a second version was proposed: *rule-utilitarianism*—that action is morally right that is an instance of a general rule, the establishment of which would produce the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals.

As many have pointed out, some version of utilitarianism underlies cost-benefit analysis, of making sure that the benefits of the research outweigh the negative consequences or harm produced by it. Such a position also seems to lie behind the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence.

If utilitarianism is one of the pillars of modern research ethics, the other is *deontology*. The deontologist claims that the moral correctness or incorrectness of an action is determined by inspecting the inherent properties of the envisioned action or rule. If it does not have these properties (e.g., if it is not universalizable), then one ought not to do it.

The most famous deontologists were Immanuel Kant and W. D. Ross. Kant's (1781/1964) deontology rests on his famous *Categorical Imperative*: Always act in such a way that one could will the maxim of one's action to become a universal law of human conduct. A second formulation of the categorical imperative was as follows: Treat humanity, whether others or yourself, always as an end and never merely as a means. In short, one should never exploit people but treat them as intrinsically valuable.

Clearly, much of the current thinking about research ethics is explicitly based on something like a Kantian deontology: Respect people's rights, treat them as autonomous agents, don't deceive them, and so on, are explicitly Kant-inspired ethical principles.

Another deontological theory is the approach of W. D. Ross (1930). According to Ross, there are several kinds of ethical duties we have that emerge as a result of encountering certain kinds of personal and social situations. These he called *prima facie duties*; these obligations can only be overridden by other ethical considerations. For example, moral principles like those proposed earlier are neither absolute nor relative, but they are always relevant. They can be overturned only when there are other ethical duties that outweigh them. This view underlies *principlism* (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001; Belmont Report, 1978) and the model adopted here.

Finally, there has arisen a feminist ethics, sometimes called the *ethics of care*, which has influenced our model. According to this view (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), one's ethical obligations are one's duties to particular types of people—for instance, to family members. One's duty is to care for them, look after their welfare and well-being, and nurture their growth and development. Although this view is critical of abstract ethical rules and principles, it should remind researchers that they have some obligation to care for research participants.

These theories of ethics represent most contemporary approaches to a philosophy of ethics. Some of these are more relevant to social science research ethics than others are, and some of these are more familiar to

the general public. For most of the 20th century, the major contenders were deontology and utilitarianism, but in the 1960s, virtue theory became a strong third candidate. Since then, there has emerged a plethora of competing views about the nature of ethical obligation.

So far, we have mentioned four levels of ethical behavior and decision making. As we proceeded through this list, the discussion became more and more abstract, hence removed from the nitty-gritty of ethical decision making. And yet, such a model is part of the standard view. One could also argue that it is implicitly present in the Belmont Report (1978) and in the ethical stance to be found in the published volumes of many national commissions. However, our last level—the level of meta-ethics—is not explicitly present in these accounts, although it is implicitly in them and one that is necessary to add to the standard model.

Level 5: Meta-Ethics

The subject matter of meta-ethics concerns questions *about* ethical theory; it is not concerned with ethical theory itself. Fundamentally, it is concerned with the meaning and justification of ethical statements. Although this has rarely been pointed out, biomedical and social science ethics have debated issues in meta-ethics for decades. The questions that are at the center of this discussion include the following.

First, is there a single ethical theory (e.g., utilitarianism) or ethical principle (e.g., nonmaleficence) that is adequate for social science research ethics, or are there many ethical stances that are valuable and should be retained? Most individuals seem to assume a pluralism, in which all the various ethical approaches have something to offer when it comes to thinking about matters ethical.

Second, since not all these ethical theories are simultaneously compatible but rather conflict, which one should guide our ethical reflection? Utilitarianism might recommend a cost-benefit approach, whereas deontology might propose that one should never violate an individual's privacy. Since different ethical theories conflict, how should one decide which one to follow? Currently, there are several approaches to this question. A *rankings* approach suggests that the various ethical theories need to be ranked in importance and weighted; for example, deontology is higher than utilitarianism. A *balancing* approach claims that all the approaches are valuable and, in a given situation, must be balanced to get the best overall combination.

A third issue concerns the question of the appropriate method to use in applied ethics. If particular cases are at the bottom and abstract general principles are at the top, then the question is whether one proceeds in a top-down fashion or in a bottom-up fashion. In the top-down approach, one begins with abstract ethical theory (or principles) and then proceeds to apply these principles to concrete cases, most typically by a deductive process (*deductivism*). A somewhat related top-down approach is *specificationism* (Richardson, 1990), which proceeds by taking a general ethical norm and making it more specific by incorporating more and more details about the why, when, how, and so on, until the specified norms lead to a directive about the particular case at hand. (One can also combine specification with balancing.)

On the other hand, one can also proceed in an inductive manner. *Inductivism* was the method employed by

the APA in generating its code. One begins with judgment about particular cases and then proceeds to induce a general summary statement covering these cases. In this approach, a general ethical principle or theory is just a convenient summary of what has already been decided.

More radical than inductivism is *particularism.* Being opposed to ethical theory and hence denying the existence and need for general ethical principles or theory, particularism argues that one makes an ethical judgment or decision after looking at all the details of a particular case. There is no reason to think that another particular case will have any property of sufficient ethical importance to warrant a general connection between such cases. Everything is decided on a case-by-case basis. Hence, particularism denies ethical rules, ethical principles, and ethical theory.

A position closely related to particularism is *casuistry* (Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988): One engages in ethical reasoning by first looking at a particular case. These cases, if sufficiently important, are taken to be paradigm cases. One can then classify these various paradigm cases in a taxonomy and proceed to reason by analogy from them to new cases. Casuistry does not deny the importance of some ethical principles but insists that inferential principles involve reasoning by analogy between particular cases.

The standard model in bioethics and in social science research ethics is *principlism*, according to which there are several midrange ethical principles that are "freestanding" and individually warranted—for instance, autonomy and beneficence. This cluster of ethical principles is self-sufficient and not in need of justification by higher-order ethical theory; however, these principles do justify lower-level ethical rules—for example, confidentiality. When there is a conflict between such ethical principles, one may appeal to ethical theory as a useful heuristic aid in making an ethical decision about how to resolve such a conflict, but ethical theory does not deductively support a univocal decision about which principle takes preeminence.

Principlism seems to be the dominant view in bioethics and the behavioral sciences, being present in the Belmont Report (1978) and explicitly advocated in Beauchamp and Childress (2001). It is also advocated by K. Kitchener (2000), Sales and Folkman (2000), Sieber (1992), and Steininger, Newell, and Garcia (1984), among others. It is explicitly present in the 2002 revision of the APA code, which marks a radical change from previous versions, and is not present in other codes of ethics.

There are at least two alternatives to principlism: (1) the existence of a set moral rule with no higher-order set of ethical principles and (2) the existence of ethical theory and a set of ethical rules. We could diagram the possibilities as in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Models of Principlism and Alternatives

		Ethical theory	Ethical theory
	Ethical principles		Ethical principles
Ethical rules	Ethical rules	Ethical rules	Ethical rules
Particular action	Particular action	Particular action	Particular action

We believe that each of these approaches can be found among the national commissions established by the federal government in the decades since the 1970s. As noted previously, we argue for the last option.

Conclusion

No one has yet written a comprehensive history of social science research ethics, nor has anyone written a theoretical account of the ethics of social science research that is both sensitive to the empirical, scientific details of this area and grounded in an adequate philosophical theory. Although we do not feel that our approach sufficiently does these things, we do hope we can stimulate others to reflect on these issues and to work on producing an up-to-date and comprehensive account of the historical and philosophical issues surrounding the ethics of social science research. Such a project, in our view, would involve a discussion of several collateral issues, ones that have yet to be thoroughly considered: What is the value of social science knowledge? How does one compare this value with the value of behaving in a morally adequate way during the research enterprise? What is the appropriate method or methods to use in social science research? Is there a unified method applicable to all the social sciences, or must one be content with a radical pluralism in the methodology of the social sciences? Are the social sciences value laden and, if so, in what sense? Is this quality of being value laden compatible with claiming objectivity in the social sciences? And so forth.

While we wait for such an account, we must be content with something much more restrictive—a sketchy and admittedly incomplete model of social science research ethics. Although we recognize the inadequacies of our model and its shortcomings, we nevertheless believe that it provides the beginnings of a plausible account of the ethics of social science research.

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