

# Ethics and the Responsible Conduct of Research

Jason Seawright

j-seawright@northwestern.edu

March 5, 2025

What is research?

What is a human subject?

What makes research ethical?

# IRB Review

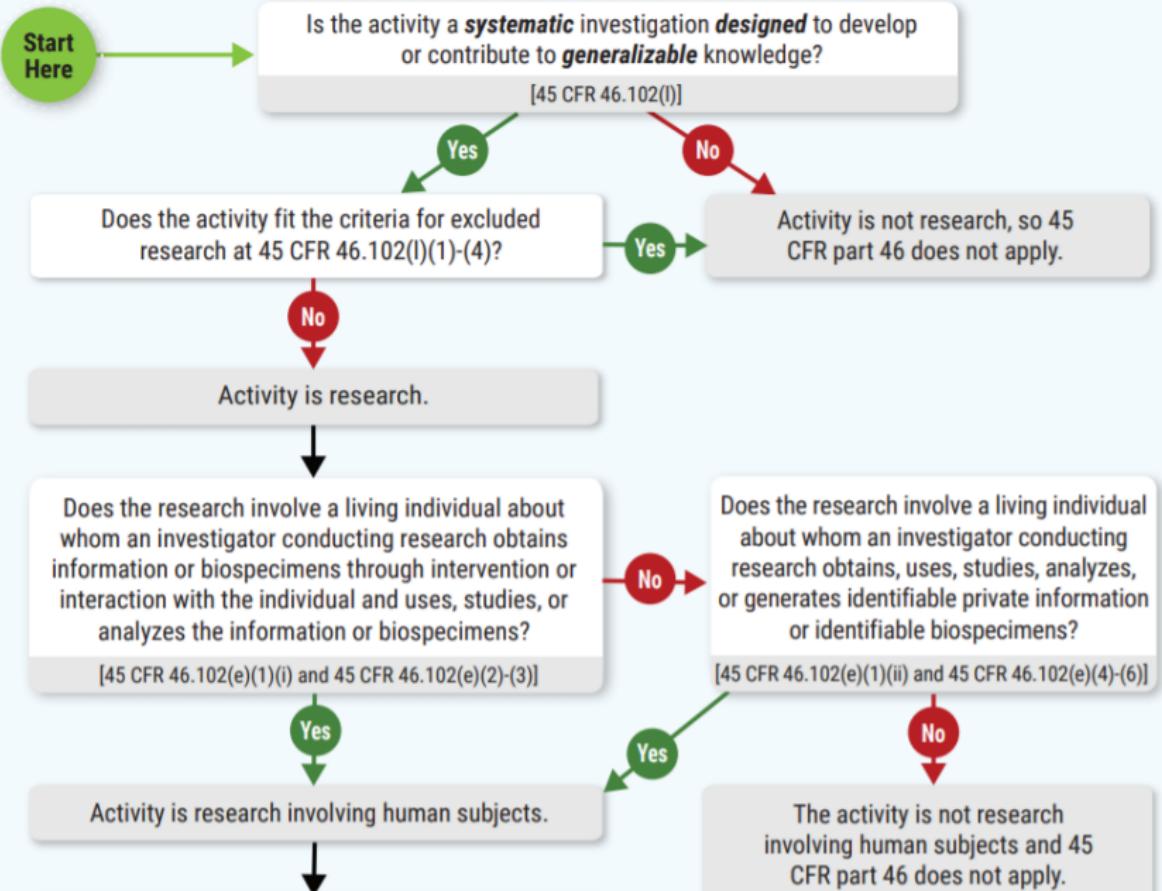
Formal institutional review is required for all human-subjects research

PROTOCOL TITLE:

## **|Human Research Determination Form**

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Prior to the initiation of any human research activity, investigators are required to submit and the IRB is required to review Human Research for which Northwestern University is engaged.



# What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia

Three scholars wrote 20 fake papers using fashionable jargon to argue for ridiculous conclusions.

By Yascha Mounk



# Blowback Against a Hoax

Author of a recent academic scam faces disciplinary action by Portland State, for failing to alert his research review board before hoodwinking journal editors with outrageous articles. Many say he's guilty of bad form, but did he commit misconduct?

By [Colleen Flaherty](#) // January 8, 2019





Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: [10.1177/0162243920923087](https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243920923087)

[journals.sagepub.com/home/sth](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sth)



# “The Grievance Studies Affair” Project: Reconstructing and Assessing the Experimental Design

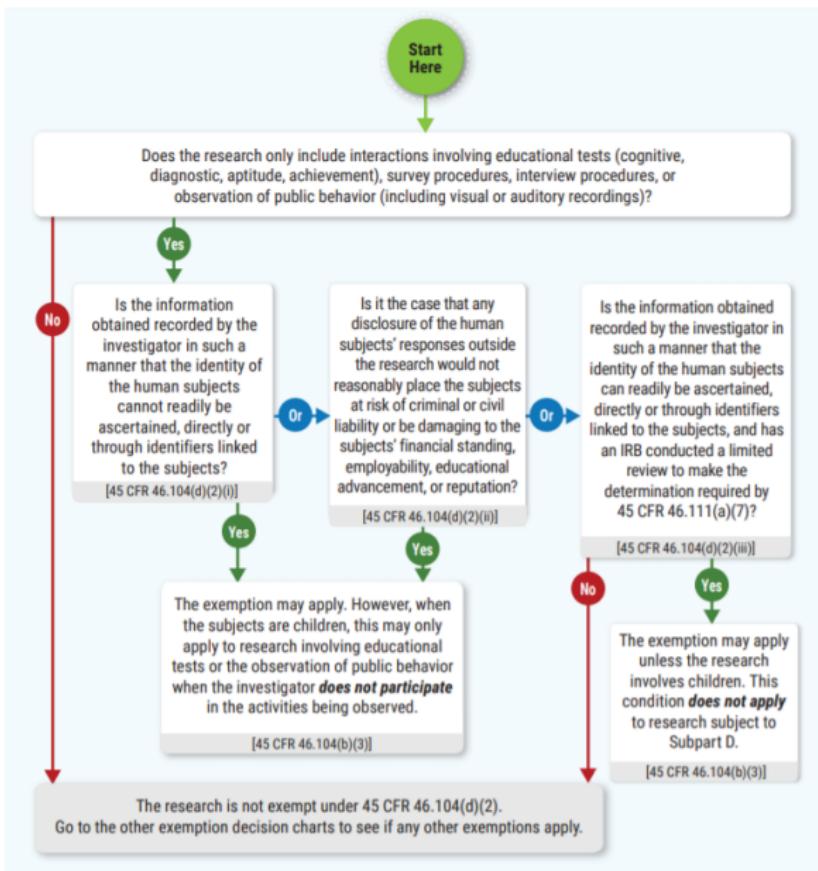
Mikko Lagerspetz<sup>1</sup>

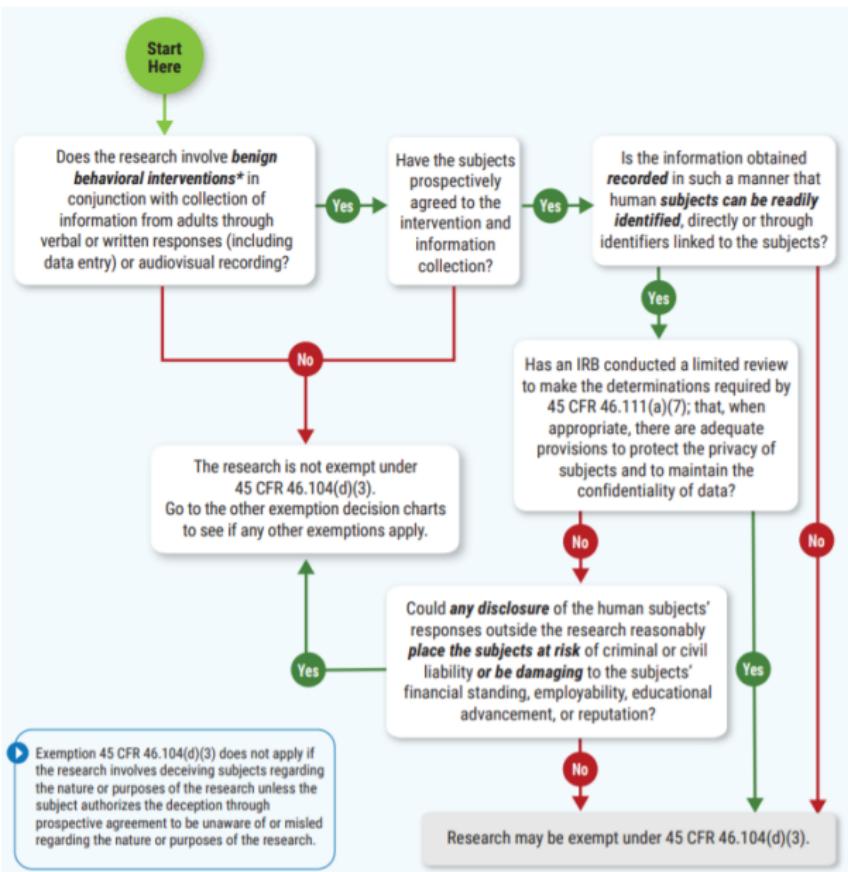
**Table I.** All Cases, by Decision Date, Abbreviation, Method, Journal Impact Factor, Number of Reviews, and Decision.

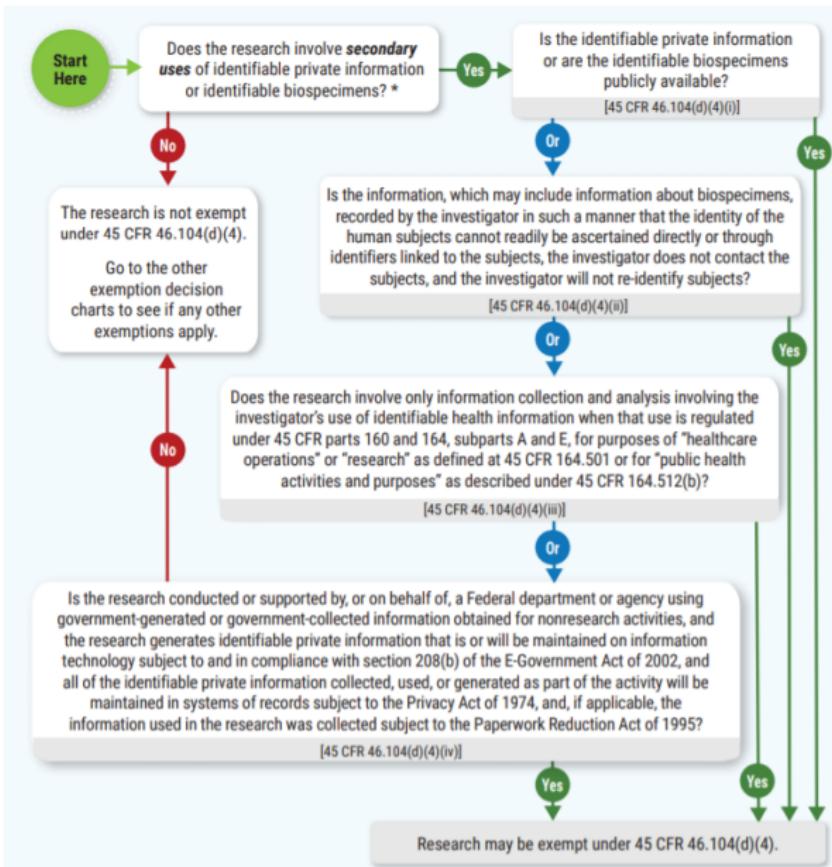
Decision Date (dd/mm/yy)	Article	Method	Two-Year Journal Impact Factor (Median = 1.086)	Number of Reviews	Decision
22/09/17	BJJ	T	2.453	—	N
19/11/17	BJJ	T	2.115	1	N
14/02/18	BJJ	T	1.636	2	N
19/02/18	Dog Park <sup>a</sup>	E	1.542	3	Y
25/02/18	Moon Meetings	P	0.486	—	Y
02/03/18	Feminist Bodybuilding	T	1.250	2	N
13/03/18	Fat Bodybuilding	T	0.458	3	Y
21/03/18	FMK	T	1.250	2	N
25/05/18	Hooters	E	2.115	3	N
09/06/18	Dildos	E	1.028	3	Y
16/07/18	CisNorm	E	2.453	4	N
31/07/18	HoH2 <sup>b</sup>	T	0.777	3	Y
09/08/18	Masturbation	T	2.030	2	N
09/08/18	WMK	T	N/A	3	N
21/08/18	FMK	T	0.861	4	Y
06/09/18	Hooters	E	1.086	2	Y
N/A	HoHI	T	0.952	—	N

# Kinds of IRB Review

- Exempt review
  - This is available for some kinds of low-risk surveys, interviews, and observation-based research
  - It is also available for some kinds of low-risk experiments, involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection







# Kinds of IRB Review

- Expedited review
  - Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

# Kinds of IRB Review

- Expedited review

- Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

# Kinds of IRB Review

- Full review

# The IRB Process

[https://irb.northwestern.edu/  
submitting-to-the-irb/eirb/](https://irb.northwestern.edu/submitting-to-the-irb/eirb/)

# The IRB Process

[https://irb.northwestern.edu/  
resources-guidance/  
protocol-templates-forms/docs/  
social-behavioral-protocol---protocol---  
docx](https://irb.northwestern.edu/resources-guidance/protocol-templates-forms/docs/social-behavioral-protocol---protocol---docx)

If an IRB approves of our research, does that mean we are ethically all set?



A STUDY IN CONTROVERSY

# *Professors' Research Project Stirs Political Outrage in Montana*

By Derek Willis

Oct. 28, 2014



First, let's review the facts. Adam Bonica and Jonathan Rodden, Political Science professors and fellows at Stanford's Hoover Institution, along with Dartmouth Political Scientist Kyle Dropp, obtained \$250,000 from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and a matching \$100,000 grant from Stanford University to conduct the experiment. According to Stanford spokeswoman Lisa Lapin, the project was approved by the Dartmouth Institutional Review Board (IRB).

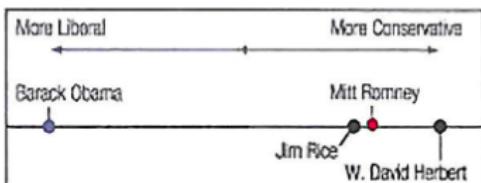


# 2014 Montana General Election Voter Information Guide

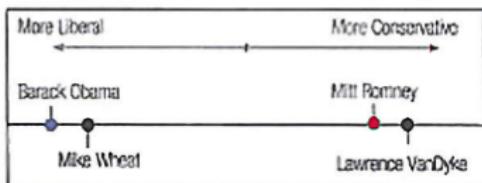
Election Date: November 4, 2014



## Nonpartisan Supreme Court Justice #1 Race



## Nonpartisan Supreme Court Justice #2 Race



For more information on how these figures were created, please see <http://data.stanford.edu/dime>. Please note that this guide is non-partisan and does not endorse any candidate or party. This guide was created as part of a joint research project at Stanford and Dartmouth.

Paid for by researchers at Stanford University and Dartmouth College, 616 Serra Street, Stanford, CA 94305

**Take this to the polls!**

This mailer, which three political scientists sent to 100,000 voters as an experiment, indicated ideological leanings in nonpartisan races for judgeships. The state is investigating the project.

# Protecting the Community: Lessons from the Montana Flyer Project

Jeremy B. Johnson, *Carroll College*

**ABSTRACT** In October 2014, flyers appeared in mailboxes of Montana voters that positioned nominees for the state Supreme Court according to an ideological scale. The study, authored by researchers from Stanford and Dartmouth, was met with public outrage. The Commissioner of Political Practices in Montana asked me to vet the ethics of the study. The investigation led me to conclude that current Institutional Review Board (IRB) practices are inadequate for evaluating research involving field experiments in political science because there is no explicit attention in the process to protect a community. I believe the IRB should mandate that researchers explicitly address implications about how their research could affect the communities they study.

# Fraud/Misconduct

- Fabrication
- Falsification
- Plagiarism, etc.

# Fabrication

Inventing research data or analytic results from scratch, and distributing them in some way.

# Irregularities in LaCour (2014)

*David Broockman, Assistant Professor, Stanford GSB (as of July 1),  
[dbroockman@stanford.edu](mailto:dbroockman@stanford.edu)*

*Joshua Kalla, Graduate Student, UC Berkeley, [kalla@berkeley.edu](mailto:kalla@berkeley.edu)  
Peter Aronow, Assistant Professor, Yale University, [peteraronow@yale.edu](mailto:peteraronow@yale.edu)*

*May 19, 2015*

1. The article claims that both studies were drawn from two distinct, non-random, snowball samples of voters in Los Angeles County, California. However, the distribution of the gay feeling thermometer in both studies is identical to the same feeling thermometer in a national survey dataset to which the author had access. However, it differs strongly from a variety of reference distributions of this item from other datasets.

4. The changes in respondents' feeling thermometer scores are perfectly normally distributed. Not one respondent out of thousands provided a response that meaningfully deviated from this distribution.

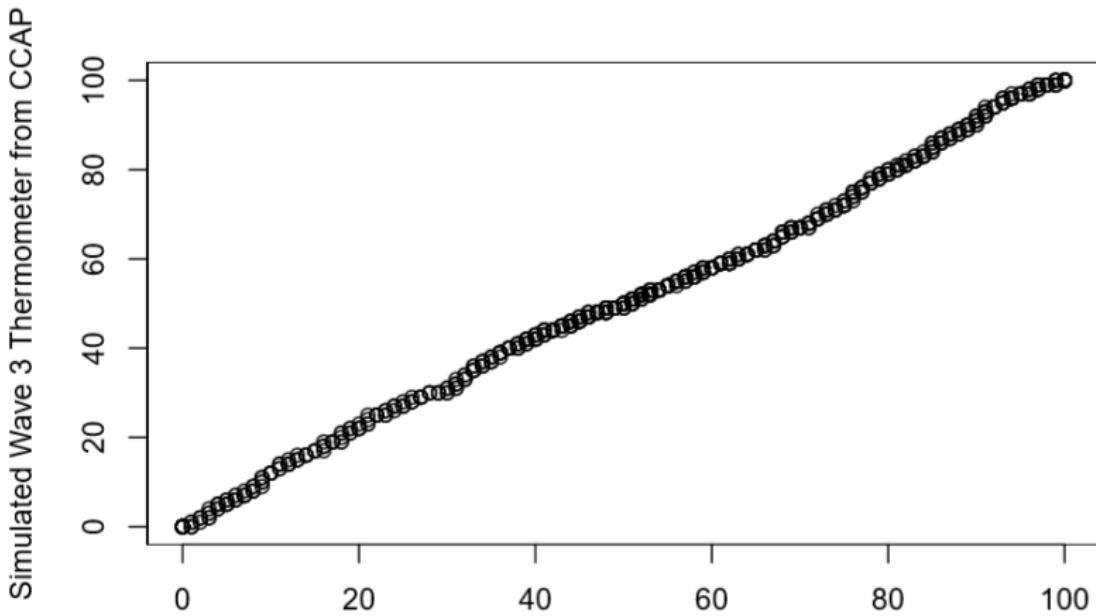
8. All the above patterns can be explained by an extremely simple data generating process with the 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) data as its starting point.

Below we provide replication code that reveals these irregularities.

## 8. Clear reproducibility based on simple data simulation

Following the simple procedure below generates patterns that are indistinguishable from the distribution in the data.

```
# Simulate the simple noise addition pattern we suspect.  
therm3.simulated <- round(ccap.therm + rnorm(n = length(ccap.therm), mean = 0, sd = 8.4))  
therm3.simulated[therm3.simulated<0] <- 0  
therm3.simulated[therm3.simulated>100] <- 100  
  
# Comparison of simulated and claimed real data - KS and QQ Plot  
par(mfrow=c(1,1))  
qqplot(therm3.simulated, lacour.study2.controlgroup$Therm_Level.3,  
       xlab = "LaCour (2014) Wave 3 Thermometer, Study 2",  
       ylab = "Simulated Wave 3 Thermometer from CCAP")
```



LaCour (2014) Wave 3 Thermometer, Study 2

```
ks.test(therm3.simulated, lacour.study2.controlgroup$Therm_Level.3)
```

```
##  
## Two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test  
##  
## data: therm3.simulated and lacour.study2.controlgroup$Therm_Level.3  
## D = 0.0328, p-value = 0.2187
```

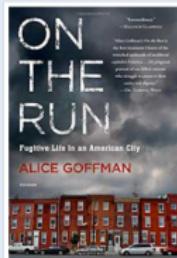
THE NEW  
RAMBLER.

AN ONLINE REVIEW OF BOOKS

Categories / Law / Ethics On The Run / REVIEWS / POLITICAL SCIENCE



281



## Ethics On The Run

By STEVEN LUBET

*Review of ON THE RUN: Fugitive Life in an American City (Fieldwork Encounters and Discoveries), by Alice Goffman*

University of Chicago Press, 2014

This brings us another of Goffman's uncertain vignettes. She describes in great detail the arrest at a Philadelphia hospital of one of the 6<sup>th</sup> Street Boys who was there with his girlfriend for the birth of their child. In horror, Goffman watched as two police officers entered the room to place the young man in handcuffs, while the new mother screamed and cried, "Please don't take him away. Please, I'll take him down there myself tomorrow, I swear – just let him stay with me tonight." (p. 34). The officers were unmoved; they arrested not only Goffman's friend, but also two other new fathers who were caught in their sweep.

How did the policemen know to look for fugitives on the maternity floor? Goffman explains:

According to the officers I interviewed, it is standard practice in the hospitals serving the Black community for police to run the names of visitors or patients while they are waiting around, and to take into custody those with warrants ...

This account raises many questions. Even if police officers had the time and patience to run the names of every patient and visitor in a hospital, it would violate the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) for the hospital simply to provide an across-the-board list. And even if a couple of officers could somehow persuade hospital personnel to turn over a patient log, why would they care about the maternity floor instead of, say, the emergency room, where they would be far more likely to encounter gang members? And then, even if the officers had, for reasons of their own, decided to trawl for maternity visitors, why would they confide that to a stranger like Goffman – in the middle of a series of arrests, with at least one new mother screaming in the background – instead of brushing her off with the usual refrain of “Nothing to see here; move along”?

I sent the relevant paragraphs of *On the Run* to a source in the Philadelphia Police Department who has personal knowledge of warrant practices during the entire period of Goffman's study. When I asked if her account was possible, he said, "No way. There was never any such policy or standard practice." In addition, he told me that all of the trauma centers in Philadelphia – where police are most likely to be "waiting around," as Goffman put it, for prisoners or shooting victims – have always been extremely protective of their patient logs. He flatly dismissed the idea that such lists ever could have been available upon routine request as Goffman claims. "That's outlandish," he said.



CRIME

# The Ethics of Ethnography

Alice Goffman's heralded book about inner-city life has come under fire for inconsistencies and inaccuracies. Is the author to blame—or does the fault lie with her field?

By LEON NEYFAKH

JUNE 18, 2015 • 5:58 PM

I came away from the conversation with a sense that there are indeed factual inaccuracies throughout *On the Run*. However, they are not the product of the kind of fraud we're used to seeing in publishing scandals, and it would be unfair to say they place Goffman in the company of fabulists like Stephen Glass or data-cookers like Michael LaCour. That's because the majority of what I'm calling "inaccuracies" were introduced into *On the Run* because the conventions of sociological ethnography required them. In keeping with the methodological protocols of her chosen discipline, which typically demands that researchers grant their subjects total anonymity, Goffman changed details and scrambled facts in order to prevent readers from deducing the identities of the people she was writing about. In the process, she made her book all but impossible to fact-check.

"It makes it really hard to verify—you don't even know if the people exist," said Christopher Winship, a sociologist at Harvard University. He added, "The discipline thinks it's fine and that's probably totally wrong."

University of Chicago sociologist Richard Taub doesn't think it's fine and explained why: "Your honor—your word—is the only thing you have to make your stuff believable, because your job is to not let anyone track these people down," he told me. "It's a terrible problem."

Taub is among the ethnographers who would prefer not to anonymize their research to the extent IRBs oblige them to. He wanted to use actual place names in his 2006 book *There Goes the Neighborhood*, co-written with Harvard's William Julius Wilson, about four working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Chicago, but decided not to because the authors knew the institutional review board at the University of Chicago wouldn't allow it.

# Falsification

Manipulating real data or analytic results to distort their meaning and implications.

October 1, 2018 – March 31, 2019

# Semiannual Report to Congress



**National Science Foundation**  
Office of Inspector General  
NSF-OIG-SAR-60

## PROFESSOR FALSIFIED AND FABRICATED FIGURES, BLAMED STUDENTS, AND INVENTED COLLEAGUE

A university investigated allegations of falsification against a professor. The professor allegedly altered a figure in a manuscript to show a desired result rather than the experimental result obtained by his graduate students. The professor told the investigation committee (IC) that he altered the figure because his students had not properly analyzed the experimental data, so it was a correction, not a falsification. The IC found the professor had no evidence to support his response, and there was ample evidence supporting a conclusion that he altered the figure to enhance the results and to get a manuscript accepted for publication. The IC concluded the professor falsified the figure and accompanying caption.

We accepted the university's report and concurred with its findings. We recommended NSF make a finding of research misconduct, debar the professor for 5 years, and direct that he complete a responsible conduct of research (RCR) course within a year. Additionally, we recommended that for 7 years NSF: bar him from serving as a peer reviewer or advisor; require him to provide certifications and assurances; and submit a detailed data management plan with each new proposal.

# Human Subjects: Belmont Report

- Respect for persons
- Beneficence
- Justice

# Human Subjects: Belmont Report

Respect for persons: informed consent

# Human Subjects: Belmont Report

Beneficence: maximize benefits and minimize risk

# Human Subjects: Belmont Report

Justice: protect vulnerable people and make sure costs and benefits of research are distributed equitably