LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to
LO 1 Explain why it is important to be ethical in research.
LO 2 Define scientific misconduct, research fraud, and plagiarism.
LO 3 Describe power relations in social research.
LO 4 Identify major ethical issues involving research with human participants.
LO 5 Differentiate between voluntary and informed consent.
LO 6 Explain special considerations that need to be made when working with special populations.
LO 7 Define privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.
LO 8 Explain ethical issues that are specific to research involving sponsors.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics include the concerns, dilemmas, and conflicts that arise over the proper way to conduct research. Ethics help to define what is or is not legitimate to do, or what “moral” research procedures involve. This is not as simple as it may seem, because there are few ethical absolutes and only agreed-upon broad principles. These principles require judgment in their application, and some may conflict with others in practice. Many ethical issues ask
you to balance two values: the pursuit of knowledge and the rights of research participants or others in society. Social researchers balance potential benefits (such as advancing the understanding of social life, improving decision making, or helping research participants) against potential costs (such as loss of dignity, self-esteem, privacy, or democratic freedoms). Social researchers confront many ethical dilemmas and must decide how to act. They have a moral, professional obligation to be ethical, even if research participants are unaware of or unconcerned about ethics.

Many areas of professional practice have ethical standards (e.g., journalists, police departments, business corporations), but the ethical standards for doing social research are often stricter. To do professional social research, you must both know the proper research techniques (e.g., sampling, data collection) and be sensitive to ethical concerns. This is not always easy. For centuries, moral, legal, and political philosophers have debated the ethical issues researchers regularly face.

It is difficult to fully appreciate the ethical dilemmas experienced by researchers until you actually begin to do research, but waiting until the middle of a study is too late. You need to prepare yourself ahead of time and consider ethical concerns as you design a study so that you can build sound ethical practices into a study’s design. In addition, by developing sensitivity to ethical issues you will be alert to potential ethical concerns that can arise as you make decisions while conducting a study. Also, an ethical awareness will help you better understand the overall research process.

Ethics begin and end with you, the individual social researcher. A researcher’s strong personal moral code is the best defence against unethical behaviour. Before, during, and after conducting a study, a researcher has opportunities to, and should, reflect on the ethics of research actions and consult his or her conscience. Ultimately, ethical research depends on the integrity of the individual researcher.

**Why Be Ethical?**

Given that most people who conduct social research are genuinely concerned about others, you might ask why any researcher would ever act in an ethically irresponsible manner. Apart from the rare disturbed individual, most unethical behaviour by researchers is due to a lack of awareness and to pressures on researchers to take ethical shortcuts. Researchers face pressures to build a career, publish new findings, advance knowledge, gain prestige, impress family and friends, hold on to a job, and so forth. Being ethical almost always means that the research will take longer to complete, cost more money, be more complicated, and be more likely to produce ambiguous results. Moreover, there are many opportunities in research to act unethically, the odds of getting caught are small, and written ethical standards are in the form of vague, loose principles.

The ethical researcher gets few rewards and wins no praise. The unethical researcher, if caught, faces public humiliation, a ruined career, and possible legal action. The best preparation for ethical behaviour is to internalize a sensitivity to ethical concerns, to adopt a serious professional role, and to interact regularly with other researchers. Moreover, the scientific community demands ethical behaviour without exceptions.

**Scientific Misconduct** The research community and agencies that fund research particularly oppose a type of unethical behaviour called scientific misconduct, which includes research fraud and plagiarism.

**Scientific misconduct** occurs when a researcher falsifies or distorts the data or the methods of data collection, or plagiarizes the work of others. It also includes significant, unjustified departures from the generally accepted scientific practices for doing and reporting on research.

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**LO 1** Explain why it is important to be ethical in research.

**Scientific misconduct:** When someone engages in research fraud, plagiarism, or other unethical conduct that significantly deviates from the accepted practice for conducting and reporting research within the scientific community.
Box 3.1 In the News

Accusations of Scientific Misconduct

A high-profile case of suspected research fraud made media headlines and became the subject of a three-part special on CBC's The National in 2006. Dr. Ranjit Chandra, a world-renowned researcher in nutrition and immunology at Memorial University, Newfoundland, held several large industry-sourced research grants and was twice nominated for a Nobel Prize. His career was on a stellar trajectory until allegations of research fraud began to surface.

The first allegation that something was amiss with Chandra’s research arose in the early 1990s. One of his research associates, a nurse-researcher at Janeway Hospital, had been put in charge of recruiting newborns to take part in a study on whether infant formula could reduce allergies. She was to find more than 200 newborns who had parents with allergies and who resided in St. John’s. Suspicion arose when, despite the fact that the nurse had not even completed recruiting the infants for the study, Chandra published a research paper on the outcomes of the study, finding that formula was able to reduce allergies—specifically, formula that was made by a major funder of his research (Nestlé Company). She decided to report this to the university administration. An inquiry by the university was not successful as Chandra could not produce the data under question; he stated that it had been stolen, even suggesting that the nurse had stolen it.

Then, in 2001, the British Medical Journal (BMJ) contacted Memorial University with concerns over some statistical findings that Chandra had reported in a research article. Chandra had apparently made some striking findings about how seniors’ memories were affected by taking a multivitamin—the same multivitamin for which he held a patent. Months passed after Chandra was requested to provide the data and Chandra failed to comply; again, he said that his data had been lost. It should be noted that although BMI did not publish this article, Chandra went on to publish the research in 2001 in another journal, Nutrition, which retracted the article in 2005, citing Chandra’s conflict of financial interests (i.e., Chandra owned the patent of the supplement) and suspicious data among the reasons for retracting.

While Memorial University followed procedures for investigating the allegations made against Chandra, no disciplinary action against him was ever taken. Chandra retired from the university in 2002 and moved out of the country.

Research fraud occurs when a researcher fakes or invents data that he or she did not really collect or fails to honestly and fully report how he or she conducted a study. Though rare, it is considered a very serious violation. The most famous case of research fraud was that of Sir Cyril Burt, the father of British educational psychology. Burt died in 1971 as an esteemed researcher who was famous for his studies on twins, which showed a genetic basis for intelligence. In 1976, however, it was discovered that he had falsified data and the names of his coauthors. Unfortunately, the scientific community had been misled for nearly 30 years.  

Plagiarism occurs when a researcher “steals” the ideas or writings of another or uses them without citing the source. Plagiarism includes stealing the work of another researcher, an assistant, or a student and misrepresenting it as one’s own. This is a serious breach of ethical standards. Plagiarism by students is just as unethical as when it is done by research professionals, and it can have serious consequences. An undergraduate student at Memorial University was recently accused of child abuse when she failed to reference an account of a juvenile sex offender who abused children in the offender’s care. A graphic description of the abuse, which was added as an appendix to her research paper, had been copied word for word out of a textbook. The student failed to reference the source, however, and the professor marking her paper thought that it was the student’s personal account of abusing children. The professor then contacted Child Protection Services, which resulted in a 12-year battle for this student to clear her name.

Unethical but Legal

Behaviour may be unethical but legal (i.e., not break any law). A plagiarism case illustrates the distinction between legal and ethical behaviours. The American Sociological Association documented that a 1988 book by a dean from Eastern New Mexico University contained large sections of a 1978 dissertation that a sociology professor at Tufts University
had written but that it did not have any footnotes. Copying the dissertation was not illegal; it did not violate copyright law because the sociologist’s dissertation did not have a copyright filed with the U.S. government. Nevertheless, it was clearly unethical according to standards of professional behaviour.³ (See Figure 3.1 for the relations between legal and moral actions.)

**Power Relations**

A professional researcher and the research participants or employee-assistants are in a relationship of unequal power and trust. An experimenter, survey director, or research investigator has power over participants and assistants, and in turn they trust his or her judgment and authority. The researcher's credentials, training, and professional role and the place of science in modern society legitimate the power and make it into a form of expert authority. Some ethical issues involve an abuse of power and trust. A researcher’s authority to conduct social research and to earn the trust of others is always accompanied by an immutable ethical responsibility to guide, protect, and oversee the interests of the people being studied.

When looking for ethical guidance, researchers are not alone. They can turn to a number of resources: professional colleagues, ethical advisory committees, institutional review boards or human subjects committees at a college or institution (discussed later), codes of ethics by professional associations (discussed later in this chapter), and writings on ethics in research. The larger research community firmly supports and upholds ethical behaviour, even if an individual researcher is ultimately responsible to do what is ethical in specific situations.

**ETHICAL ISSUES INVOLVING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Have you ever been a participant in a research study? If so, how were you treated? More attention is focused on the possible negative effects of research on those being studied than on any other ethical issue, beginning with concerns about biomedical research. Acting ethically requires a researcher to balance the value of the advancement of knowledge against the value of noninterference in the lives of others. Either extreme causes problems. Giving research participants absolute rights of noninterference could make empirical research impossible, but giving researchers absolute rights of inquiry could nullify participants’ basic human rights. The moral question becomes this: When, if ever, are researchers justified in risking physical harm or injury to those being studied, causing them great embarrassment or inconvenience, violating their privacy, or frightening them?

The law and codes of ethics recognize some clear prohibitions: Never cause unnecessary or irreversible harm to subjects; secure prior voluntary consent, when possible; and never unnecessarily humiliate and degrade subjects or release harmful information about specific individuals that was collected for research purposes. In other words, you should always show respect for the research participant. These are minimal standards and are subject to interpretation (e.g., What does unnecessary mean in a specific situation?).

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**Figure 3.1** Typology of Legal and Moral Actions in Social Research

LO 3 Describe power relations in social research.

LO 4 Identify major ethical issues involving research with human participants.
Origins of Research Participant Protection

Concern over the treatment of research participants arose after the revelation of gross violations of basic human rights in the name of science. The most notorious violations were “medical experiments” conducted on Jews and others in Nazi Germany and similar “medical experiments” to test biological weapons by Japan in the 1940s. In these experiments, terrible tortures were committed. For example, people were placed in freezing water to see how long it took them to die; purposely starved to death; or intentionally infected with horrible diseases, and limbs were severed from children and transplanted onto others.4

Such human rights violations did not occur only in the distant past. In 1997, as a result of a famous case of unethical research known as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment (also called bad blood), the president of the United States admitted wrongdoing and formally apologized to the participant victims. Until the 1970s, when a newspaper report caused the scandal to erupt, the U.S. Public Health Service had been sponsoring a study in which poor, uneducated Black men in Alabama suffered and died of untreated syphilis while researchers studied the severe physical disabilities that appear in advanced stages of the disease. The unethical study began in 1929, before penicillin was available to treat the disease, but it continued long after treatment had become available. Despite their unethical treatment of the subjects, the researchers were able to continue to publish their results for 40 years. The study ended in 1972, but a formal apology took another 25 years to materialize.5

Unfortunately, the bad blood scandal is not unique. During the 1950s, the U.S. government periodically compromised ethical research principles for military and political goals, including within Canadian research institutions. From 1957 to 1964, experiments using the psychedelic drug lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD, or “acid” as it is commonly known) were conducted at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal. The experiments were tied to a larger U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) project (Project MKULTRA) that aimed to learn how drugs can be used to control people’s minds. The CIA research undertaken at the Allan Memorial Institute focused on the use of LSD for mind control and for correcting schizophrenia. Today, researchers widely recognize these to be violations of two fundamental ethical principles: Avoid physical harm, and obtain informed consent.6

Physical Harm, Psychological Abuse, and Legal Jeopardy

Social research can harm a research participant in several ways—physically, psychologically, and legally—as well as harm a person’s career, reputation, or income. Different types of harm are more likely in certain types of research (e.g., in experiments versus field research). It is a researcher’s responsibility to be aware of all types of potential harm and to take specific actions to minimize the risk to participants at all times.

**Physical Harm** Physical harm is rare. Even in biomedical research, where the intervention into a person’s life is much greater, only 3 to 5 percent of studies involved any person who suffered any harm.7 A straightforward ethical principle is that researchers should never cause physical harm. An ethical researcher anticipates risks before beginning a study, including basic safety concerns (e.g., safe buildings, furniture, and equipment). This means that he or she screens out high-risk subjects (e.g., those with histories of heart conditions, mental breakdown, or seizures) if great stress is involved and anticipates possible sources of injury or physical attacks on research participants or assistants. The researcher accepts moral and legal responsibility for injury from participation in research and terminates a project immediately if he or she can no longer fully guarantee the physical safety of the people involved (see the Zimbardo study in Box 3.2).
Psychological Abuse, Stress, or Loss of Self-Esteem  The risk of physical harm is rare, but social researchers may place people in highly stressful, embarrassing, anxiety-producing, or unpleasant situations. Researchers want to learn about people’s responses in real-life, high-anxiety-producing situations, so they might place subjects in realistic situations of psychological discomfort or stress. Is it unethical to cause discomfort? The ethics of the famous Milgram obedience study are still debated (see Box 3.2). Some say that the precautions taken and the knowledge gained outweighed the stress and potential psychological harm that subjects experienced. Others believe that the extreme stress and the risk of permanent harm were too great. Such an experiment could not be conducted today because of heightened sensitivity to the ethical issues involved.

Social researchers have created high levels of anxiety or discomfort. They have exposed participants to gruesome photos; misled male students into believing that they have strong feminine personality traits or lied to students that they have failed; created situations of high fear (e.g., releasing smoke into a locked room); asked participants to harm others; placed people in situations where they face social pressure to deny their convictions; and had participants lie, cheat, or steal. Researchers who study helping behaviour often place participants in emergency situations to see whether they will lend assistance. For example, Piliavin and associates (1969) studied helping behaviour in subways by having someone...
pretend to collapse on the floor. In the field experiment, the riders in the subway car were unaware of the experiment and did not volunteer to participate in it but were nonetheless exposed to this stressful experience.

Only highly experienced researchers should consider conducting a study that purposely induces great stress or anxiety in research participants, and they must take all necessary precautions before inducing anxiety or discomfort. The researchers should consult with others who have conducted similar studies and with mental health professionals as they plan the study. They should screen out high-risk populations (e.g., those with emotional or cardiac problems) and arrange for emergency interventions or termination of the research if dangerous situations arise. They must always obtain written informed consent (discussed later) before the research, and they must debrief subjects immediately afterward (i.e., explain any deception and what actually happened in the study). Researchers should never create unnecessary stress (i.e., beyond the minimal amount needed to create the desired effect) or stress that lacks a very clear, legitimate research purpose. Knowing what constitutes a "minimal amount" of stress comes only with experience. It is better to begin with too little stress, risking a finding of no effect, than to create too much stress. It is always wise to work in collaboration with other researchers when the risk to participants is high, because the involvement of several ethically sensitive researchers reduces the chances of making an ethical misjudgment.

Research that induces great stress and anxiety in participants also carries the danger that experimenters will develop a callous or manipulative attitude toward others. Some researchers have reported feeling guilt and regret after conducting experiments that caused psychological harm to subjects. Experiments that place subjects in anxiety-producing situations may produce significant personal discomfort for the ethical researcher as well.

**Legal Harm** A researcher is responsible for protecting research participants from increased risk of arrest. If participation in research increases the risk of arrest, few individuals will trust researchers or be willing to participate in future research. Potential legal harm is one criticism of Humphreys’s 1975 tearoom trade study (see Box 3.2).

A related ethical issue arises when a researcher learns of illegal activity when collecting data. A researcher must weigh the value of protecting the researcher–subject relationship and the benefits to future researchers against potential serious harm to innocent people. The researcher bears the cost of his or her judgment. For example, in his field research on police, Van Maanen (1988, pp. 114–115) reported witnessing police beatings, illegal acts, and irregular procedures but said, “On and following these troublesome incidents, I followed police custom: I kept my mouth shut.” Is this ethical? While the researcher was able to maintain his relationship with the police, he did nothing while illegal acts occurred. This is just one case where the ethical responsibilities of the researcher are not clear-cut.

Field researchers in particular can face difficult ethical decisions. For example, when studying a mental institution, Taylor (1987) discovered the mistreatment and abuse of inmates by the staff. He had two choices: (1) Abandon the study and call for an immediate investigation, or (2) keep quiet and continue with the study for several months, publicize the findings afterward, and then become an advocate to end the abuse. After weighing the situation, he followed the latter course and is now an activist for the rights of inmates in mental institutions.

In some studies, observing illegal behaviour may be central to the research project. If a researcher covertly observes and records illegal behaviour, then supplies the information to law-enforcement authorities, he or she is violating ethical standards regarding research participants and is undermining future social research. At the same time, a researcher who fails to report illegal behaviour is indirectly permitting criminal behaviour. He or she could be charged as an accessory to a crime. It should be noted that all Canadians, including researchers, are legally required to report any cases of abuse involving children.
Other Harm to Participants

Research participants may face other types of harm. For example, a survey interview may create anxiety and discomfort if it asks people to recall unpleasant or traumatic events. An ethical researcher must be sensitive to any harm to participants, consider precautions, and weigh potential harm against potential benefits.

Another type of harm is a negative impact on the careers, reputations, or incomes of research participants. For example, a researcher conducts a survey of employees and concludes that the supervisor’s performance is poor. As a consequence, the supervisor loses her job. Or a researcher studies homeless people living on the street. The findings show that many engage in petty illegal acts to get food. As a consequence, a city government “cracks down” on the petty illegal acts and the homeless people can no longer eat. What is the researcher’s responsibility? The ethical researcher considers the consequences of research for those being studied. The general goal is not to cause any harm simply because someone was a research participant. However, there is no set answer to such questions. A researcher must evaluate each case, weigh potential harm against potential benefits, and bear the responsibility for the decision.

Maximizing Benefit

On the flipside of minimizing harm is the principle of maximizing benefit. In Canada, the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (discussed in more detail later) specifies that researchers have a duty to maximize the benefits that their research has on others. Some research involving humans, such as that in social work, education, and health care, can produce clear benefits to the research subjects themselves. The benefits of most social science research, however, would be for society as a whole and for the advancement of knowledge.

Deception and Consent

Has anyone ever told you a half-truth or a lie to get you to do something? How did you feel about it? Social researchers follow the ethical principle of voluntary consent: Never force anyone to participate in research, and do not lie to anyone unless it is necessary and the only way to accomplish a legitimate research purpose. Those who participate in social research should explicitly agree to participate. A person’s right not to participate can be a critical issue whenever the researcher uses deception, disguises the research, or uses covert research methods.

Social researchers sometimes deceive or lie to participants in field and experimental research. A researcher might misrepresent his or her actions or true intentions for legitimate methodological reasons. For example, if participants knew the true purpose they might modify their behaviour, making it impossible to learn about their real behaviour. Another situation occurs when access to a research site would be impossible if the researcher told the truth. Deception is never preferable, however, if the researcher can accomplish the same thing without using deception.

Experimental researchers often deceive subjects to prevent them from learning the hypothesis being tested and to reduce “reactive effects” (see Chapter 9). Deception is acceptable only if a researcher can show that it has a clear, specific methodological purpose, and even then the researcher should use it only to the minimal degree necessary. Researchers who use deception should always obtain informed consent, never misrepresent risks, and always explain the actual conditions to participants afterward. You might ask: How can a researcher obtain prior informed consent and still use deception? He or she can describe the basic procedures involved and conceal only specific information about hypotheses being tested.

Sometimes field researchers use covert observation to gain entry to field research settings. In covert observation, the people who are being studied are not aware that they are being
studied. This is different from overt observation, where researchers openly reveal themselves as persons conducting research to the people they are studying (this is covered more in Chapter 13). In studies of cults, small extremist political sects, illegal or deviant behaviour, or behaviour in a large public area, it may be impossible to conduct research if a researcher announces and discloses her or his true purpose. But if a covert stance is not essential, a researcher should not use it. If he or she does not know whether covert access is necessary, then a strategy of gradual disclosure may be best. When in doubt, it is best to err in the direction of disclosing one’s true identity and purpose. Covert research remains controversial, and many researchers feel that all covert research is unethical. Even those who accept covert research as ethical in certain situations say that it should be used only when overt observation is impossible. Whenever possible, the researcher should inform participants of the observation immediately afterward and give them an opportunity to express concerns.

Deception and covert research may increase mistrust and cynicism and may diminish public respect for social research. Misrepresentation in field research is analogous to being an undercover agent or government informer in nondemocratic societies. The use of deception has a long-term negative effect: It increases distrust among people who are frequently studied and makes doing social research more difficult in the long term.

**Informed Consent**  A fundamental ethical principle of social research is this: Never coerce anyone into participating; participation must be voluntary at all times. Permission alone is not enough. People need to know what they are being asked to participate in so that they can make an informed decision. Participants can become aware of their rights and what they are getting involved in when they read and sign a statement giving informed consent—an agreement by participants stating that they are willing to be in a study after they know something about what the research procedure will involve.

Governments vary in the requirement for informed consent. The Canadian federal government does not require informed consent in all research involving human subjects, although there is a strong recommendation that informed consent be received. The Tri-Council Policy Statement does consider research situations where obtaining informed consent may be problematic. Nevertheless, researchers should get written informed consent unless there are good reasons for not obtaining it (e.g., covert field research, use of secondary data) as judged by a research ethics board (REB).

Informed consent statements provide specific information (see Box 3.3). A general statement about the kinds of procedures or questions involved and the uses of the data is sufficient for informed consent. Studies suggest that participants who receive a full informed consent statement do not respond differently from those who do not. If anything, people who refuse to sign such a statement are more likely to guess or answer “no response” to questions.

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**Box 3.3 Making It Practical**

**Informed Consent**

Informed consent statements contain the following:

1. A brief description of the purpose and procedure of the research, including the expected duration of the study
2. A statement of any risks or discomfort associated with participation
3. A guarantee of anonymity and the confidentiality of records
4. The identification of the researcher and of where to receive information about subjects’ rights or questions about the study
5. A statement that participation is completely voluntary and can be terminated at any time without penalty
6. A statement of alternative procedures that may be used
7. A statement of any benefits or compensation provided to subjects and the number of subjects involved
8. An offer to provide a summary of findings
It is unethical to coerce people to participate, including offering them special benefits that they cannot otherwise attain. For example, it is unethical for a commanding officer to order a soldier to participate in a study, for a professor to require a student to be a research subject to pass a course, or for an employer to expect an employee to complete a survey as a condition of continued employment. It is unethical even if someone other than the researcher (e.g., an employer) coerces people (e.g., employees) to participate in research.

Full disclosure with the researcher’s identification helps to protect research participants against fraudulent research and to protect legitimate researchers. Informed consent lessens the chance that a con artist in the guise of a researcher will defraud or abuse subjects. It also reduces the chance that someone will use a bogus identity to market products or obtain personal information on people for unethical purposes.

Legally, a signed informed consent statement is optional for most survey, field, and secondary data research, but it is often mandatory for qualitative interviews and experimental research. Informed consent is impossible to obtain in existing statistics and documentary research. The general rule is this: The greater the risk of potential harm to research participants, the greater the need to obtain a written informed consent statement from them. In sum, there are many sound reasons to get informed consent and few reasons not to get it. See Box 3.4 for a discussion of informed consent and social research on the internet.

Box 3.4 Social Research and the Internet

Online Research and Ethics

In the past decade, the internet has not only improved researchers’ access to data through high-speed connections to remote sources, but has also increasingly served as the mechanism through which data are collected as well as the subject of data collection itself. Numerous studies have been completed using web materials and online communities. The ethical issues in online research are complex because they ask new questions about the boundaries between public and private life. Is everything that is viewable on the internet “public” and therefore requires no consent from participating users?

Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans states that

[research that is non-intrusive, and does not involve direct interaction between the researcher and individuals through the Internet, also does not require REB review. Cyber-material such as documents, records, performances, online archival materials or published third party interviews to which the public is given uncontrolled access on the Internet for which there is no expectation of privacy is considered to be publicly available information. Exemption from REB review is based on the information being accessible in the public domain, and that the individuals to whom the information refers have no reasonable expectation of privacy.

However, there are situations where REB review is required. There are publicly accessible digital sites where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. When accessing identifiable information in publicly accessible digital sites, such as Internet chat rooms and self-help groups with restricted membership, the privacy expectation of contributors to these sites is much higher. (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2010, p. 140)

Note that an important distinction is made in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: If no interaction is occurring between the researcher and the individuals, no ethics clearance is required. If researchers are interacting with internet community members, particularly in areas of restricted access, research ethics approval is required. This means that it will be necessary for researchers to obtain informed consent from the people on which they wish to do research.

In her study of online eating disorder (pro-ED) communities, Whitehead (2010) did not undergo ethics review:

All the data (written material and photographs) gathered for the present case study is—or was at the time of the study—publicly available on the Internet. I did not become a member of any of the websites nor did I announce my presence to the community . . . I only analyzed information that was publicly available online and was not under any expectation of privacy . . . On the websites I visited, the statements, narratives, photos, and opinions of the members were under no expectation of privacy and were thus treated as public information. In fact, numerous sites I visited were personal homepages of women involved in the Pro-ED community designed specifically for public viewing. Some sites had private chatrooms and message boards which I did not enter, nor did I participate in any communication that was assumed to be private.” (p. 601)

If Whitehead had engaged in private communications through emailing individuals or participating in private chat rooms and wished to use the exchanges in her research, she would have needed to obtain research ethics approval and gain the informed consent of the individuals with whom she was corresponding.
SPECIAL POPULATIONS AND NEW INEQUALITIES

Some populations are unique in that efforts to “enforce” the practice of obtaining informed consent by obtaining written consent, for example, can actually work to discourage the participants from participating. It simply is not the case that everyone sees these efforts to protect research participants as respectful safeguards. People may be offended to be asked to sign a form, for example, as it may represent something “too formal” or suggest that their word is not good enough.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement specifies that researchers must have respect for vulnerable persons. Some populations or groups of research participants are not capable of giving true voluntary informed consent. Special populations include those who may be more susceptible to possible abuse by researchers given their (1) limited mental capacity, (2) subservient power position in a potential research study, or (3) history of oppression and exploitation. Students, prison inmates, employees, military personnel, the homeless, welfare recipients, children, or the developmentally disabled may not be fully capable of making a decision, or they may agree to participate only because they see their participation as a means of obtaining a desired good—such as teacher approval, early parole, promotions, or additional services.

It is unethical to involve such vulnerable people (e.g., children, the mentally disabled) in research unless a researcher meets two minimal conditions: (1) a legal guardian grants written permission, and (2) the researcher follows all standard ethical principles to protect the participant from harm. For example, a researcher wants to conduct a survey of high school students to learn about their sexual behaviour and drug/alcohol use. If the survey is conducted on school property, school officials must give official permission. For any research participant who is a legal minor (usually less than 18 years old), written parental permission is needed. It is best to ask permission from each student as well. See Box 3.5 for a discussion of ethical considerations around doing research on Aboriginal peoples—a population that has been historically oppressed and exploited in Canada.

The use of coercion to participate can be a tricky issue, and it depends on the specifics of a situation. For example, a convicted criminal faces the choice between imprisonment and participation in an experimental rehabilitation program. The convicted criminal may not believe in the benefits of the program, but the researcher may believe that it will help the criminal. This is a case of coercion. A researcher must honestly judge whether the benefits to the criminal and to society greatly outweigh the ethical prohibition on coercion. This is risky. History shows many cases in which a researcher believed he or she was doing something “for the good of” someone in a powerless position (e.g., prisoners, students, homosexuals), but it turned out that the “good” actually was for the researcher or a powerful organization in society, and it did more harm than good to the research participant.

Today, it is unlikely that individuals will be coerced into participating in research; however, there are still cases where people may be implicitly coerced. Undergraduate students who are asked to participate in research in classes may feel obligated to participate because they want a good grade. Prisoners or people in institutions may feel that they would receive better treatment if they participated in research studies or, conversely, they may feel that if they did not participate they would receive worse treatment.

You may have been in a social science class in which a teacher required you to participate as a subject in a research project. This is a special case of coercion and is usually unethical. Teachers have made three arguments in favour of requiring student participation: (1) It would be difficult and prohibitively expensive to get participants otherwise, (2) the knowledge created from research with students serving as subjects benefits future students and society, and (3) students will learn more about research by experiencing it directly in a realistic research setting. Of the three arguments, only the third justifies limited coercion. This limited coercion is acceptable only as long as it meets three conditions: (1) It is
attached to a clear educational objective, (2) the students have a choice between research experience or an alternative activity, and (3) all other ethical principles of research are being followed. Researchers must be aware of the power differentials between themselves and the people they are studying when they are seeking voluntary participation from potential research subjects.

PRIVACY, ANONYMITY, AND CONFIDENTIALITY

How would you feel if private details about your personal life were shared with the public without your knowledge? Because social researchers sometimes invade the privacy of subjects to study social behaviour, they must take several precautions to protect research participants’ privacy.

The historical imbalance of power between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in Canada has crept into the research process, and as such recent attention has been given to developing culturally appropriate research techniques. One major aspect of such an approach is the idea of ownership. Rather than simply being a “subject” of research with little or no community benefits, techniques that involve the community in all aspects of study design, data collection, analysis, and policy implications are advocated, thereby giving Aboriginal communities ownership of the research process and outcomes. Rather than being people who are researched, culturally appropriate research techniques demand that Aboriginal communities be involved in all aspects of the research to maximize the benefits to the community. In addition, such techniques also reduce the power imbalances between the researcher and subject because such an approach requires the researcher to relinquish control over decision making (Castleden, Garvin, and Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008). Techniques that permit this sort of power sharing are often called community-based participatory research and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 13.

In 2008, the Government of Canada issued new protocols on research involving human subjects (Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans) to add a new section specifically directed at research involving Aboriginal peoples (Chapter 9 of the report: Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples). The protocols require community engagement in the research practice, respect for community governing authorities, respect for traditional knowledge, and demonstration of mutual benefit of the research. Many research ethics boards have also adjusted their membership to include Aboriginals or created REBs that are specific to research with Aboriginals so that decisions regarding the ethics of research involving Aboriginal people can be assessed more closely in accordance to the principles of the Tri-Council Policy Statement.

LO 7 Define privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.
Privacy

Survey researchers invade a person’s privacy when they probe into beliefs, backgrounds, and behaviours in a way that reveals intimate private details. Experimental researchers sometimes use two-way mirrors or hidden microphones to “spy” on subjects. Even if people know they are being studied, they are unaware of what the experimenter is looking for. Field researchers may observe private aspects of behaviour or eavesdrop on conversations.

In field research, privacy may be violated without advance warning. When Humphreys (1975) served as a “watchqueen” in a public restroom where homosexual contacts took place, he observed very private behaviour without informing the subjects. When Piliavin and colleagues (1969) had people pretend to collapse on subways to study helping behaviour, those in the subway car had the privacy of their ride violated. People have been studied in public places (e.g., in waiting rooms, on streets, in classrooms), but some “public” places are more private than others (consider, for example, the use of periscopes to observe people who believed they were alone in a public toilet stall).

Eavesdropping on conversations and observing people in quasi-private areas raises ethical concerns. To be ethical, a researcher violates privacy only to the minimal degree, as necessary, and only for legitimate research purposes. In addition, he or she takes steps to protect the information about participants obtained from public disclosure.

Anonymity

Researchers protect privacy by not disclosing a participant’s identity after information is gathered. This takes two forms, both of which require separating an individual’s identity from his or her responses: anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity means that people remain anonymous or nameless. For example, a field researcher provides a social picture of a particular individual but gives a fictitious name and location and alters some characteristics. The subject’s identity is protected, and the individual remains unknown or anonymous. Survey and experimental researchers discard the names or addresses of subjects as soon as possible and refer to participants only by a code number to protect anonymity. There are some cases where keeping participants’ names is necessary. If a researcher uses a mail survey and includes a code on the questionnaire to determine which respondents failed to respond, he or she is not keeping respondents anonymous during that phase of the study. In panel studies, researchers track the same individuals over time, so they do not uphold participant anonymity within the study. Likewise, historical researchers use specific names in historical or documentary research. They may do so if the original information was from public sources; if the sources were not publicly available, a researcher must obtain written permission from the owner of the documents to use specific names.

It is difficult to protect research participant anonymity. In one study about a fictitious town, “Springdale,” in Small Town in Mass Society (Vidich & Bensman, 1968), it was easy to identify the town and specific individuals in it. Town residents became upset about how the researchers portrayed them and staged a parade mocking the researchers. People often recognize the towns studied in community research. Yet, if a researcher protects the identities of individuals with fictitious information, the gap between what was studied and what is reported to others raises questions about what was found and what was made up. A researcher may breach a promise of anonymity unknowingly in small samples. For example, let us say you conduct a survey of 100 university students and ask many questions on a questionnaire, including age, sex, religion, and hometown. The sample contains one 22-year-old Jewish male born in Stratford, Ontario. With this information, you could find out who the specific individual is and how he answered very personal questions, even though his name was not directly recorded on the questionnaire.

Confidentiality

Even if a researcher cannot protect anonymity, he or she should protect participant confidentiality. Anonymity means protecting the identity of specific individuals from becoming
known. **Confidentiality** can include information with participant names attached, but the researcher holds it in confidence or keeps it secret from public disclosure. The researcher releases data in a way that does not permit linking specific individuals to responses and presents it publicly only in an aggregate form (e.g., as percentages or statistical means).

A researcher can provide anonymity without confidentiality or vice versa, although they usually go together. Anonymity without confidentiality occurs if all the details about a specific individual are made public but the individual’s name is withheld. Confidentiality without anonymity occurs if detailed information is not made public, but a researcher privately links individual names to specific responses.

In 1917, the Statistics Act was passed in Canada, which gave the Canadian government the right “to collect, compile, analyze, abstract, and publish statistical information relating to the commercial, industrial, financial, social, economic, and general activities and conditions of the people.” In addition to the rights of Statistics Canada to collect information on the public, the Statistics Act also established the legal obligation of the agency to protect the confidentiality of research subjects such that information will never be made public that could identify them. In 1999, the chief statistician at Statistics Canada refused to hand over control of the 1901 Historic Census records to the National Archives of Canada because it was assumed that a promise of “perpetual confidentiality” was made to census respondents in 1901. Some people argued that the records should be destroyed to protect the privacy of respondents, while other people felt that destroying these census records would be a senseless waste of valuable historical data. After investigation by an expert panel, however, census data was eventually handed over to the National Archives and can be examined online and in person at the Archives in Ottawa. A revised section of the Statistics Act from 2005 now allows census information to be publicly released after 92 years. In other situations, other principles may take precedence over protecting research participant confidentiality. For example, when studying patients in a mental hospital, a researcher discovers that a patient is preparing to kill an attendant. The researcher must weigh the benefit of confidentiality against the potential harm to the attendant. Each situation must be considered on its own merits (see Box 3.6).

### Box 3.6 In the News

**The Case of Russell Ogden**

Social researchers can pay high personal costs for being ethical. Russell Ogden, a master’s degree criminology student at Simon Fraser University, became the first (and so far only) Canadian researcher to receive a subpoena and be asked to reveal the identities of his research participants. Ogden had been studying assisted suicide during the time when Sue Rodriguez, a British Columbia woman dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease), was bringing the “right to die” debate all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. She died in 1994, and that same year the Vancouver coroner subpoenaed Ogden and asked him to identify two of his research participants who may have witnessed an assisted suicide and therefore would be possible murder suspects under Canadian law. Ogden refused to provide the information, even under threat of contempt of court and prison time, as he had guaranteed confidentiality to his research participants. The judge at the coroner’s inquest ruled that Ogden was in a position of privilege and did not have to reveal his sources to the coroner. Ogden’s research made headlines again in 2008 and 2009 when Kwantlen University College, his current employer, denied Ogden permission to pursue additional research on assisted suicides. For his research, Ogden had proposed to be present at and observe assisted suicides of the terminally ill. Kwantlen University College did not want to be implicated in endorsing a researcher’s presence during an illegal act. The research itself had been approved by the university research ethics board in 2005; it was the university administration that ordered him to stop in 2008. The case was brought to the attention of the Canadian Association of University Teachers for possibly putting the academic freedom of Ogden at risk. In early 2009, Ogden was permitted to continue the research that was originally approved by Kwantlen University College.
A special concern with anonymity and confidentiality arises when a researcher studies “captive” populations (e.g., students, prisoners, employees, patients, soldiers). Gatekeepers, or those in positions of authority, may restrict access unless they receive information on subjects. For example, a researcher studies drug use and sexual activity among high school students. School authorities agree to cooperate under two conditions: (1) Students need parental permission to participate, and (2) school officials get the names of all drug users and sexually active students to assist the students with counselling and to inform the students’ parents. An ethical researcher will refuse to continue rather than meet the second condition. Even though the officials claim to have the participants’ best interests in mind, the privacy of participants will be violated and they could be in legal harm as a result of disclosure. If the school officials really want to assist the students and not use researchers as spies, they could develop an outreach program of their own.

Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality in Online Research

The issues relating to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality apply to all forms of research, including those that occur online. The waters become quite a bit murkier, however, in the area of online research. We can probably agree that observational research that takes place in a shopping mall or busy urban street is “public” and ethically sound, but does this realm also include all information that can be obtained online (Bos et al., 2009)? In an online setting, where does the distinction between “private” and “public” lie?

Research ethics boards (REBs) have guidelines to follow as per the Tri-Council Policy Statement (discussed in Box 3.4). Many researchers, however, are encountering new and unique problems with online research, especially as digital cultures become more and more researched. In the event of disasters, for example, is it necessary to obtain REB approval (which can sometimes be rather time consuming) before studying the online response on Twitter or similar social media sites? Can such phenomena even be studied given such requirements? Is it necessary—or even possible—to uphold anonymity for individuals with very prominent online presences, such as a Twitter user with thousands of followers? At this point in social research, there is no “set standard” across nations in terms of how such ethical dilemmas are addressed in social research, unlike the other much more clear-cut ethical issues discussed earlier (such as physical and psychological harm). From a social research methods perspective, this murkiness is likely to play itself out in a variety of interesting cases in the near future.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

While numerous principles of ethical research have been identified above, the basic principle of modern research ethics and the basis for the aforementioned ethical principles is nested in the “cardinal” principle of respect for human dignity. It is this principle—which endeavours to safeguard the multifaceted interests of the person—that guides the ethical standards by which scientists must undertake research in Canada.

Mandated Protections of Research Participants

Many governments have regulations and guidelines to protect research participants and their rights. In Canada, these guidelines are found in the rules and regulations issued by the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (PRE). This panel comprises experts from three Canadian research agencies: (1) the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), (2) the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and (3) the Natural
Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC). From this panel, the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* was born. This code began development in 1994 but was not implemented until 1998.

**ETHICS AND THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY**

The Canadian Sociological Association (CSA) and the American Sociology Association (ASA) set the standards for ethics codes within North American sociology. These discipline-based codes of ethics emerged in the early 1970s. Prior to the early 1990s, the CSA referred to the ASA code, after which it decided to create its own code. The standards of these professional organizations were implemented by the universities within individual departments, although the application was not uniform. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council then developed a code of ethics for the social sciences and made adherence to these guidelines mandatory for the receipt of funding. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* was implemented in 1998 with the idea that it would be a single, standardized policy that would be applicable to all research in Canada, which would be preferable to the numerous codes of ethics created by various professional organizations and funding agencies.

In Canada, researchers wishing to use human subjects in their studies must write a proposal about their research detailing how and why human subjects will be used and safeguards that will be put in place to guarantee that the ethical principles outlined above are adhered to, which is then vetted by the *research ethics board* at their home university.

Physicians, attorneys, family counsellors, social workers, and other professionals have a *code of ethics* and peer review boards or licensing regulations. The codes formalize professional standards and provide guidance when questions arise in practice. Professional social science associations have codes of ethics that identify proper and improper behaviour. They represent a consensus of professionals on ethics. All researchers may not agree on all ethical issues, and ethical rules are subject to interpretation, but researchers are expected to uphold ethical standards as part of their membership in a professional community.

The origins of codes of research ethics can be traced to the Nuremberg Code adopted during the Nuremberg Military Tribunal on Nazi war crimes held by the Allied Powers immediately after World War II. The code, developed as a response to the cruelty of concentration camp experiments, outlines ethical principles and rights of human subjects, including the following:

- Voluntary consent
- Avoidance of unnecessary physical and mental suffering
- Avoidance of any experiment where death or disabling injury is likely
- Termination of research if its continuation is likely to cause injury, disability, or death
- Conduct of experiments by highly qualified people using the highest levels of skill and care
- Results that are aimed at the good of society and that are unattainable by any other method

The principles in the Nuremberg Code dealt with the treatment of human subjects and focused on medical experimentation, but they became the basis for the ethical codes in social research as well. Similar codes of human rights, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations and the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki by the World Medical Association, also have implications for social researchers. Box 3.7 lists some of the basic principles of ethical social research.
Professional social science associations have committees that review codes of ethics and hear about possible violations, but there is no formal policing of the codes. The penalty for a minor violation rarely goes beyond a letter of complaint. If laws have not been violated, the most extreme penalty is the negative publicity surrounding a well-documented and serious ethical violation. The publicity may result in the loss of employment, a refusal to publish the researcher's findings in scholarly journals, and a prohibition from receiving funding for research—in other words, banishment from the community of professional researchers.

Codes of ethics do more than codify thinking and provide individual researchers with guidance; they also help universities and other institutions defend ethical research against abuses. In the case of the Ogden study on assisted suicide mentioned earlier in the chapter (see Box 3.6), however, the university immediately distanced itself from the researcher when the story gained media attention. Ogden later successfully sued the university for legal fees involved in the case.

ETHICS AND THE SPONSORS OF RESEARCH

Whistle-Blowing

You might find a job where you do research for a sponsor—an employer, a government agency, or a private firm that contracts with a researcher to conduct research. Special ethical problems arise when a sponsor pays for research, especially applied research. Researchers may be asked to compromise ethical or professional research standards as a condition for receiving a contract or for continued employment. Researchers need to set ethical boundaries beyond which they will refuse the sponsor’s demands.

When confronted by an illegitimate demand from a sponsor, a researcher has three basic choices: (1) Remain loyal to the organization or larger group, (2) exit the situation, or (3) voice opposition (Hirschman, 1970). These present themselves as caving in to the sponsor, quitting, or becoming a whistle-blower. The researcher must choose his or her own course of action, but it is best to consider ethical issues early in a relationship with a sponsor and to express concerns up front.

The term whistle-blower describes the researcher who sees ethical wrongdoing but cannot stop it even after informing superiors and exhausting internal avenues to resolve the issue. He or she then turns to outsiders and informs an external audience, agency, or the media. See Box 3.8 for a famous Canadian case of whistle-blowing. The researcher must be
ever, the researcher must follow generally accepted research methods. Researchers must research techniques used (e.g., survey versus experiment) and limit costs for research. How study or by limiting the techniques used? Sponsors can legitimately set some conditions on is it ethically acceptable for a sponsor to limit research by defining what a researcher can limits on how to conduct studies

**Arriving at Particular Findings**

What should you do if a sponsor tells you, directly or indirectly, what results you should come up with before you do a study? In the Olivieri example cited in Box 3.8, the researcher was being pressured to promote a drug that she did not think was safe. An ethical researcher will refuse to participate if he or she is told to arrive at specific results as a precondition for doing research. Legitimate research is conducted without restrictions on the possible findings that a study might yield.

**Limits on How to Conduct Studies**

Is it ethically acceptable for a sponsor to limit research by defining what a researcher can study or by limiting the techniques used? Sponsors can legitimately set some conditions on research techniques used (e.g., survey versus experiment) and limit costs for research. However, the researcher must follow generally accepted research methods. Researchers must

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**Box 3.8 In the News**

**Dr. Olivieri and the University of Toronto**

You have seen by now that issues of ethics can often seem fairly straightforward. A lot of the examples of ethical violations that are given in textbooks are extreme cases. A recent Canadian case demonstrates that acting in an ethical manner can result in unforeseen consequences.

In 1998, Dr. Nancy Olivieri was working at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children with children who had a rare blood disorder. She was working on clinical trials and revealed that she considered an experimental drug unsafe. The trials were run by a large Canadian drug manufacturing company, which cancelled the research project and tarnished Olivieri’s professional reputation when she decided to publicly reveal her concerns about the safety of the drug. The University of Toronto and the Hospital for Sick Children initially did not fully support her academic freedom and her ethical responsibilities until pressured by an international outcry.

This example demonstrates that speaking out against research that is funded by large and powerful companies can have an enormous personal cost, even if done to uphold ethics.13

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convinced that the breach of ethics is a serious one and is approved by the organization. After exhausting internal avenues to resolve the issue, the researcher turns to outsiders. This is, however, risky. Outsiders may or may not be interested in the problem or able to help and often have their own priorities (discrediting the organization, sensationalizing the problem, etc.) that differ from the researcher’s primary concern (ending the unethical behaviour). Supervisors or managers may try to discredit or punish anyone who exposes problems and acts disloyal. Under the best of conditions, the issue may take a long time to resolve and create great emotional strain. By doing what is moral, a whistle-blower needs to be prepared to make sacrifices—loss of a job or promotion, lowered pay, an undesirable transfer, abandonment by friends at work, or legal costs. There is no guarantee that doing the ethical or moral thing will stop the unethical behaviour or protect the honest researcher from retaliation.

Applied social researchers in sponsored research settings need to think seriously about their professional roles. They may want to maintain some independence from an employer and affirm their membership in a community of dedicated professionals. Many find a defence against sponsor pressures by being members of professional organizations (e.g., the Evaluation Research Society), maintaining regular contacts with researchers outside the sponsoring organization, and staying current with the best research practices. The researcher least likely to uphold ethical standards in a sponsored setting is someone who is isolated and professionally insecure. Whatever the situation, unethical behaviour is never justified by the argument, “If I didn’t do it, someone else would have.”
give a realistic appraisal of what can be accomplished for a given level of funding. The issue of limits is common in contract research, when a firm or government agency asks for work on a particular research project. There is often a tradeoff between quality and cost. Moreover, once the research begins, a researcher may need to redesign the project, or costs may be higher than expected. The contract procedure makes midstream changes difficult. A researcher may find that he or she is forced by the contract to use research procedures or methods that are less than ideal. The researcher then confronts a dilemma: Complete the contract and do low-quality research, or fail to fulfill the contract and lose money and future jobs.

A researcher should refuse to continue a study if he or she cannot uphold generally accepted standards of research. If a sponsor demands a biased sample or leading survey questions, the ethical researcher should refuse to cooperate. If a legitimate study shows a sponsor’s pet idea or project to be a disaster, a researcher may anticipate the end of employment or pressure to violate professional research standards. In the long run, the sponsor, the researcher, the scientific community, and society in general are harmed by the violation of sound research practice. The researcher has to decide whether he or she is a “hired hand” who always gives the sponsors what they want, even if it is ethically wrong, or a professional who is obligated to teach, guide, or even oppose sponsors in the service of higher moral principles.

A researcher should ask: Why would sponsors want the social research conducted if they are not interested in using the findings or in the truth? The answer is that some sponsors are not interested in the truth and have no respect for the scientific process. They see social research only as a “cover” to legitimize a decision or practice that they plan to carry out, and use research only to justify their action or deflect criticism. They abuse the researcher’s professional status and undermine the integrity of science to advance their own narrow goals. They are being deceitful by trying to “cash in” on social research’s reputation for honesty. When such a situation occurs, an ethical researcher has a moral responsibility to expose and stop the abuse.

Suppressing Findings

What happens if you conduct a study and the findings make the sponsor look bad, so the sponsor does not want to release the results? Government agencies may suppress scientific information that contradicts official policy or embarrasses high-ranking officials. Social researchers who are employed by government agencies and who make information public experience retaliation. In 2000, David Healy was to take up a position at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). The British researcher was becoming known for his research that claimed that the antidepressant drug Prozac was associated with suicide attempts and estimated that a quarter of a million people worldwide had attempted suicide while on Prozac. Prior to taking up his appointment, Healy was invited to speak at a two-day conference at CAMH, where his lecture included references to his findings on the association between Prozac and suicide attempts. After this talk, however, Healy’s job offer was withdrawn. The reason he was given was that he was a poor fit for CAMH because his approach was not “compatible” with the goals of the organization. An uproar was created in the scientific community when it was revealed that Eli Lilly, manufacturers of the drug Prozac, were major funders of CAMH. The University of Toronto denied that there was any connection between Eli Lilly and the withdrawal of the job offer. Healy filed a lawsuit against the University of Toronto in 2001, and the case was eventually settled out of court.14

In sponsored research, a researcher can negotiate conditions for releasing findings prior to beginning the study and sign a contract to that effect. It may be unwise to conduct the study without such a guarantee, although competing researchers who have fewer ethical scruples may do so. Alternatively, a researcher can accept the sponsor’s criticism and hostility and release the findings over the sponsor’s objections. Most researchers prefer the first choice, since the second one may scare away future sponsors.
limit knowledge creation or restrict the autonomous scientific investigation of controversial or guise for covert government intelligence/military actions. 

from conducting a study, cutting off or redirecting funds for research, harassing individual researchers, concealing the release of findings, and protecting the identity of individuals who are close to the research and who are knowledgeable about possible consequences. Researchers shoulder the ultimate responsibility for their research. Often they can draw on many different resources, but they face many competing pressures as well.

Concealing the True Sponsor

Is it ethical to keep the identity of a sponsor a secret? For example, an abortion clinic funds a study on members of religious groups who oppose abortion, but it tells the researcher not to reveal to participants information about who is funding the study. The researcher must weigh the ethical rule that it is usually best to reveal a sponsor’s identity to participants against the sponsor’s desire for confidentiality and the reduced cooperation of participants in the study. In general, an ethical researcher will tell the subjects who is sponsoring the study unless there is a strong methodological reason for not doing so. When reporting or publishing results, the ethical mandate is very clear: A researcher must always reveal the sponsor who provides funds for a study. In Canada, most funding for university-based social science research comes from government-based funds. If you think about the types of topics that many sociologists are interested in studying, such as those who critique the corporate sector (i.e., its employment and business practices) and globalization, many areas of social science research stand a much smaller chance of obtaining private sources of funding.

Box 3.9  Making It Practical

Funding for Research in Canada

In Canada, most social science research is funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), which is a federal government–based granting agency. Two other federal granting agencies are the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), which funds health and medical research, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC).

Among these three councils, there is considerable discrepancy in the amount of funds that are allocated for research funding. For 2011–2012, the SSHRC had a budget of $332.4 million, while comparable figures for the CIHR and the NSERC were around $1 billion each. Each year in the social sciences, professors and graduate students put in applications, proposals, and budgets to the SSHRC. In 2011–2012, about 33 percent of applicants received funding. Nineteen members of the council are responsible for reporting to the Minister of Industry, who then reports to Parliament. While most of the social sciences funding in Canada is granted through the SSHRC, there is an increasing trend to look to private or corporate sources of funding in all areas of research, especially if a researcher is not successful at obtaining government-based funds. If you think about the types of topics that many sociologists are interested in studying, such as those who critique the corporate sector (i.e., its employment and business practices) and globalization, many areas of social science research stand a much smaller chance of obtaining private sources of funding.

Social researchers sometimes self-censor or delay the release of findings. They do this to protect the identity of informants, to maintain access to their research sites, to hold on to their jobs, or to protect their personal safety or that of family members. This is a less disturbing type of censorship because it is not imposed by an outside power. It is done by someone who is close to the research and who is knowledgeable about possible consequences. Researchers shoulder the ultimate responsibility for their research. Often they can draw on many different resources, but they face many competing pressures as well.

POLITICS OF RESEARCH

Ethics largely address the moral concerns and standards of professional conduct in research that are under the researcher’s control. Political concerns also affect social research, but many of these considerations are beyond the control of researchers. The politics of research usually involves actions by organized advocacy groups, powerful interests in society, governments, or politicians trying to restrict or control the direction of social research. Historically, the political influence over social research has included preventing researchers from conducting a study, cutting off or redirecting funds for research, harassing individual researchers, censoring the release of research findings, and using social research as a cover or guise for covert government intelligence/military actions.

Most users of political or financial influence to control social research share a desire to limit knowledge creation or restrict the autonomous scientific investigation of controversial
topics. Attempts at control seem motivated by a fear that researchers might discover something damaging if they have freedom of inquiry. This shows that free scientific inquiry is connected to fundamental political ideals of open public debate, democracy, and freedom of expression.

The attempts to block and to steer social research have three main causes. First, some people defend or advance positions and knowledge that originate in deeply held ideological, political, or religious beliefs, and they fear that social researchers might produce knowledge that contradicts them. Second, powerful interests want to protect or advance their political/financial position and fear social researchers might yield findings showing that their actions are harmful to the public or some sectors of society. And third, some people in society do not respect the ideal of science to pursue truth and knowledge and instead view scientific research only as a means for advancing private interests.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter began by asking the question of why researchers should be ethical. Scientific misconduct, which includes research fraud and plagiarism, was then discussed. Social researchers, by nature of their position as experts and researchers, are often in relationships of unequal power with their research subjects. It is because of this imbalance in power that measures must be taken to protect the individuals who are being researched so that their rights are not compromised.

Several ethical issues that pertain to using human research participants were then discussed. The obligations of the researcher to not cause physical, psychological, or legal harm to those he or she is researching were highlighted. The principles of obtaining voluntary and informed consent from your research participants was also explained. Circumstances around the topic of dealing with special populations were considered, particularly the case of individuals who are vulnerable or have been oppressed through racism and colonization.

The chapter then moved on to the efforts that researchers must make to protect the rights and identities of the people they are researching through ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Social researchers must ensure participant privacy because they are, due to the nature of their topics of inquiry, very likely to uncover sensitive information. They must not reveal the identities of their participants or reveal information that could identify them.

The scientific community has ethical guidelines in place to govern the behaviour of its members. All institutes of higher learning in Canada are obliged to follow the Tri-Council Policy Statement when it comes to doing research that involves human subjects. The funding of research is often provided by the Tri-Council in Canada, although private and corporate sponsoring of research also occurs. There are ethical issues that are particular to situations relating to the sponsors of research (i.e., those who are paying for the research), particularly if they attempt to suppress or influence the findings of researchers. Finally, the relationship between political ideology and research was briefly discussed, highlighting the reasons that individuals may have for trying to block or steer the course of particular research agendas.

Review Questions

1. Why it is important to be ethical in research? Give three reasons.
2. Define scientific misconduct, research fraud, and plagiarism.
3. Describe the balance of power in social research and why it is an ethical concern.
4. Identify four ethical concerns around research that involves human subjects and define them.
5. Differentiate between voluntary and informed consent.
6. Define special populations and explain the considerations that need to be made when working with such groups.
7. Define privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.
8. Explain three ethical issues that are specific to research involving sponsors.

Exercises
1. Go to your university or college’s website and find its official documents on the research ethics policies surrounding the use of human participants in research. Find passages that specifically relate to the ideas of informed consent, confidentiality, and risk. Summarize what you found in one or two paragraphs.
2. Find the forms on your university or college’s website that you would have to fill out if you wanted to do a study of your own using human participants. Thinking of a study you might like to do, fill out these forms. Which parts of the forms are most difficult to complete?
3. With regard to the story of Dr. Chandra discussed in Box 3.1, how many ethical concerns discussed in this chapter can be applied there?
4. Type “research fraud” or “scientific misconduct” into Google News and examine the first three stories that come up. Summarize the issue being dealt with in each of the stories. What types of ethical violations are being discussed? What academic disciplines do your stories cover? What are the major problems being discussed by the journalists?
5. Type “research ethics and developing countries” into Google Scholar and see what articles come up. Pick two that you will locate and read in their entirety. While this chapter’s topic was ethics in social research, what do these articles tell you about ethical issues that have emerged in biomedical research?

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