

Chapter Outlines for:

Frey, L., Botan, C., & Kreps, G. (1999). *Investigating communication: An introduction to research methods*. (2nd ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Chapter 6: Research Ethics and Politics

I. Introduction

A. Research may appear at first to be a straightforward, value-free activity, one in which a rational, correct way to operate always is evident to anyone familiar with its procedures.

B. The reality is that research is a human activity guided by value judgments that have serious moral implications.

II. Ethical Issues in Communication Research

A. There is a difference between ethical and legal principles.

1. Laws are usually not universal principles; they are conventions particular to a given culture.
2. While some act or event may be legal, it's not necessarily ethical.

B. The word *ethics* is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning "character."

1. An ethical person is a "good" person.
2. An ethical communication researcher is a person whose research activities are guided by larger concerns about fairness, honesty, and public good.
3. Philosophers generally agree that the closest synonym for the word ethics is *morality*, derived from the Latin word *moralis*, meaning "customs."
4. **Ethics** can be defined as moral principles and recognized rules of conduct regarding a particular class of human action.
5. **Research ethics** refer to moral principles and recognized rules of conduct governing the activities of researchers.
 - a. To be ethical, communication research should be consistent with fundamental moral principles that apply to all human conduct.
 - b. Communication researchers generally agree that certain forms of behavior are ethically acceptable and others unacceptable when conducting research.
 - i. Ethical decisions about research are ones that conform as well as possible to the values and behaviors considered proper by the larger community of researchers.
 - ii. Ethical decisions can rarely be judged as right or wrong; they exist on a continuum ranging from clearly unethical to clearly ethical.

C. There are politics at work in academic research and in other contexts (e.g., government, think tanks, and businesses), each has unique political features that affect the research enterprise.

1. Most students probably don't fully understand the university system, often thinking that professors are hired only to teach.
2. That may be true at some schools, but at most schools, that is not the case.
3. Professors are hired with the expectation they will engage in teaching, research, and service.
 - a. Some universities are oriented toward research and are called *Research I institutions*; often having doctoral programs, including one in communication.
 - i. Professors are judged at these universities with regard to quantity and quality of the research they publish.
 - b. At the other end of the continuum are universities and colleges, including community and junior colleges, that privilege teaching.
 - i. Teaching loads are usually much greater than at research-oriented institutions and teaching effectiveness is often the primary criterion for promotion and tenure.
 - c. Most universities and colleges are somewhere in the middle of this continuum; they promote a balance between teaching and research, with service also considered to be important (although typically less than teaching and research).
 - d. Research is a vital component of most professors' academic lives, and the importance of research is growing at most universities.
 - i. Universities are evaluated at one level by the impact of their faculty's published research.
 - ii. The job market for Ph.D.'s is quite competitive and many "teaching" institutions have had to change their emphasis to research rather than exclusively on teaching.
 - iii. Excellent teaching and research go hand-in-hand.

D. The Effects of Tenure and Promotion on Research

1. To understand the effects of university politics on professors' involvement with research, you have to understand the reward structure universities employ.
 2. Most universities have in place a tenure and promotion (T & P) system; with **tenure** meaning that a professor is guaranteed a lifetime faculty appointment at a particular institution, except in the most drastic circumstances.
 - a. Tenure has come under attack recently; but there are at least two reasons why universities award tenure.
 - i. The first reason is economics.
 - ii. The second and much more important reason is *academic freedom*, the ability to teach and research topics that professors consider to be important supposedly without political pressure.
 - iii. Tenure then guarantees that professors can't be fired from what their university for what they teach and research per se; however, this does not mean that political pressures aren't or can't be brought to bear to affect untenured or tenured professors (See UNC example).
 - b. Not all people who teach at universities have tenure or are on tenure-track lines; some teach part-time or even full-time as instructors, lecturers, or under some other title.
 - i. For those who are on a tenure-track line or have tenure, there are three levels of rank through which they are promoted beginning with Assistant Professor and culminating with Full Professor; a time period usually spanning 12 years or so.
 - ii. If a university demands substantial research to receive T & P, a person must demonstrate that this has been accomplished and in usually a 5 year time period.
 - iii. The T & P system has a tendency to privilege quantity over quality; thus, until a professor receives tenure, he or she may not be able to engage in certain types of research.
 - iv. Most universities expect that promotion to Full Professor means that the person has obtained a national, as opposed to say a regional, reputation with regard to his or her research.
 - v. There is much pressure on professors to conduct, complete, and publish research.
- E. The importance of grant money: A third political influence on professors is the growing importance of acquiring **grant money**, money awarded by public institutions (e.g., government bodies) or private individuals and organizations for the purpose of promoting research.
1. These grants are extremely competitive, and to succeed in attracting funding, researchers often have to orient their research in particular ways.
 2. Although professors choose to pursue grants, there is tremendous pressure on research universities to acquire grants.
- F. Ethical issues involving research participants: Communication researchers often send messages to individuals and measure how they react or they observe how groups of people ordinarily exchange messages among themselves and then make their findings known to others.
1. While readers of communication research can gain many benefits, the participants of a research project have an entirely different experience and may even accrue more costs than benefits.
 2. Addressing the question of—*are participants being treated right?*—helps to refocus attention on the ethics of studying human beings in communication research.
 3. There are legal guidelines and these were established primarily in response to serious breaches of ethics evidences in biomedical research (See the Nazi and Tuskegee examples).
 4. The 1960s also witnessed a number of ethically unjustifiable biomedical experiments.
 5. These and other unethical experiments led the Surgeon General in 1966 to establish a committee to review every proposal that sought PHS funding to make sure that research

participants would not be harmed and had been informed of any risks.

6. Other government agencies soon adopted this rule, and in 1974, Congress passed the National Research Act, which required all institutions to create **institutional review boards (IRBs)**.
 - a. Today, most universities require that research conducted by faculty and students, whether externally funded or not, be evaluated by their IRBs.
 - b. In evaluating a research proposal for approval, an IRB's greatest concern is to insure that the research study does not cause any harm or hardship to the people participating in the study.
 - c. IRBs essentially judge the ethical merits of a research study on a reward/cost basis.
 - d. To make these judgements, IRBs generally rely on a set of ethical guidelines established by governmental and professional associations (See Figure 6.1).
 - e. These ethical guidelines are based on four primary principles or rules of conduct commonly advocated by scholars: Provide the people being studied with free choice; protect their right to privacy; benefit, not harm them; and treat people with respect.
- G. Whenever possible, researchers first provide **voluntary informed consent** by having research participants voluntarily agree to participate only after they have been fully informed about the study.
 1. If for legal reasons participants cannot grant consent (such as in the case of children or those who are mentally disabled), consent must be obtained from the legal guardian.
 2. The principle of voluntary informed consent is very important; indeed, it is one of the fundamental principles that guide IRBs.
 - a. Although research participants typically read and sign a consent form, prior to beginning a study, there are exceptions as in the case of "low-risk" large-scale surveys where completion of a questionnaire is viewed as **implied consent**.
 - b. Voluntary informed consent is especially important within the context of research that is designed to be cooperative or empowering.
 - c. When seeking people's consent, researchers ought to provide them with some important information (See Figure 6.2).
 - d. An example of a voluntary informed consent form used by Adelman and Frey (1997) appears in Figure 6.3 (another exemplar is also included in this manual).
 - e. Informed consent also presents a dilemma to communication researchers as once prospective research participants are warned fully about what is being studied and why, that knowledge may distort the data.
 3. There are several strategies to lessen the likelihood of data distortion.
 - a. Researchers often omit information, are vague, or even are deceptive regarding what will occur or be measured (this latter approach can pose some ethical concerns).
 - b. Researchers can furnish a complete description of the study to a sample of the population and conduct focus groups to ascertain whether prospective research participants would participate in a study.
 - c. In *prior general consent plus proxy consent*, a researcher first obtains the general consent of a person to participate in a study that may involve extreme procedures.
 - i. A proxy selected by the prospective research participant examines the study's procedures in detail and then issues an affirmative or negative response; and in the case of the former, the researcher may proceed as the proxy is stating that the prospective research participant would have given consent.
 - d. Recalling that deception (See a above) poses some ethical concerns, some researchers advocate the use of role playing so that research participants are encouraged to carry out assigned tasks and not merely the behaviors sought by the researchers.
 - e. The issue regarding student participation in faculty/graduate research is unresolved with some saying it is beneficial and others contending only contaminated data result

- from such studies.
- f. In field research where the researchers do not want to encourage the Hawthorne effect, participants are often involved in studies involuntarily.
 - i. There is debate about whether such research procedures are ethical.
 - ii. The context, such as “streetstyle ethnography” (Weppner, 1977) may also mandate the foregoing of informed consent.
 - iii. There may also exist barriers to obtaining informed consent, even in health care contexts.
 - g. Some researchers engage in **debriefing** after a study is completed so that every participant receives an explanation of the full purpose of the study, as well as seeking feedback from participants to learn how they perceived the study.
 - i. Debriefing is particularly important in cases where deception has been used.
 - ii. **Desensitizing** is a type of debriefing and necessary when research participants may have acquired negative information about themselves as a result of the research study.
 - iii. **Dehoaxing** is a type of debriefing and necessary when research participants have been deceived; its purposes are to convince the participants that they were actually deceived and to lessen any adverse effects attributed to the deception.
 - iv. Being completely open when informing participants about the results of their investigation during a debriefing is not always beneficial.
 - v. Obtaining voluntary informed consent is not as simple as it may have first appeared.
 - h. Researchers usually protect privacy by assuring their research participants of anonymity or confidentiality.
 - i. **Anonymity** exists when researchers cannot connect responses to the individuals who provided them.
 - ii. **Confidentiality** exists when researchers know who said what, such as in interview research, but promise not to reveal that information publicly.
 - iii. Whenever possible, anonymity is preferable, since research data can leak out inadvertently.
 - iv. While anonymity is an important consideration in the conduct of research studies, surprising little research has been done on such effects.
 - v. When conducting research via interviews, it is virtually impossible to guarantee anonymity to interviewees.
 - vi. In naturalistic research, researchers may well have the right to videotape or photograph people behaving in public places, but there are still questions about the invasion of people’s privacy.
 - i. The appropriateness of protecting respondents’ privacy is sometimes called into question (See the example detailing possible child abuse).
 - i. Researchers are not entitled to professional privilege regarding the disclosure of research information, including research participants’ names and their activities, during criminal proceedings; with failure to disclose exposing the researchers to contempt of court charges.
 - ii. Researchers can apply for a **Federal Certificate of Confidentiality**, affording legal protection when they do not disclose research participant information; however, few of these many thousands of requests are granted.
 - j. The protection of research participants’ privacy also extends to making sure that the acquire data are secure.
 - k. In some cases, anonymity and/or confidentiality are not always desired by research participants.
 - l. The people being studied should benefit, not suffer, from participating in a research investigation.
 - i. By providing information, participants contribute to researchers’ efforts, and ethical

researchers consider how they might reciprocate.

- ii. Some researchers pay people a small fee for their participation.
- iii. The more uniquely and comprehensively the findings relate to particular research participants, the more attention must be given to benefits.
- iv. Berg (1998) identifies seven ways in which research may potentially benefit any of seven kinds of recipients and uses the example of a community to illustrate:
Valuable relationships; knowledge or education; material resources; training; employment, opportunity for advancement; opportunity to do good and to receive the esteem of others; empowerment; and/or scientific/clinical outcomes.
- m. The flip side of benefiting participants is not causing them harm.
 - i. To avoid this danger, one can study people already in that condition.
 - ii. A second approach is studying minimal levels of negative states.
 - iii. Researchers must be attentive to causing discomfort to their participants inadvertently.
 - iv. When communication researchers study how well particular treatments alleviate problems and use control groups that do not receive the treatment (see Chapter 7), they face the ethical dilemma of not benefiting their participants as well as they might.
 - v. When publishing the results of their study, researchers must also consider whether they are benefiting or harming their research participants.
- n. An easy trap for researchers too fall into is forgetting to view and treat research participants as individuals worthy of respect.
 - i. Some authorities disapprove of the term *subjects*, an expression commonly used to describe research participants and a carry-over from experiments with animals, due to its perceived dehumanizing nature.
 - ii. Sexism in research is another manifestation of a dehumanized view of people and Eichler (1988) identifies four major symptoms including *androcentricity, overgeneralization, gender insensitivity, and double standards.*
 - iii. Comparable manifestations of bias, in terms of age or race, violate the principle of respecting people.
 - iv. Researchers also express their respect for research participants by demonstrating *efficiency*—doing things right—and *effectiveness*—doing the right things.
 - v. Researchers are also accountable and must show respect to colleagues in their profession and members of society at large.

H. Ethical Decisions Involving Research Findings

1. As discussed in Chapter 1, research is cumulative and self-correcting, building on itself in a step-by-step process.
2. Scholarly journals in the communication discipline typically use a rigorous process of multiple blind review by experts in the field to determine whether research reports are of high enough quality to merit publication (see Chapter 3).
 - a. Only if a majority of the expert reviewers and the journal editor agree that the study has scholarly merit is the research report published in the journal, and thereby, disseminated to the discipline.
 - b. The American Psychological Association (1994) has also established several ethical standards for the reporting and publishing of research findings (see Figure 6.4).
 - c. Consumers rarely see the actual data; instead they take the findings on faith and read about the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data.
 - i. Only the researchers see the actual data they collect; therefore, they have an ethical responsibility to make sure that their data are collected in a reliable and valid manner (see Chapter 5), and in the case of quantitative data, that they are analyzed using appropriate statistical procedures (see Chapters 11-14).
 - d. Researchers do make mistakes when collecting and analyzing data; worse though, are

instances of outright falsification which occasionally occur.

- i. One of the reasons for having reviewers evaluate research reports submitted for publication in journals is to ensure that proper procedures are used in a study and that the data are analyzed using the most appropriate statistical procedure(s).
 - ii. Most of the time, these problems are inadvertent and can easily be corrected.
 - iii. Some data-analytic deficiencies may actually be encouraged by the nature of academic publications.
 - iv. It is also not uncommon for researchers to practice self-censorship, omitting particular facts and features of their research findings for various reasons.
 - v. Because it is difficult to evaluate the actual research data, researchers need to be as clear as possible when reporting what they were looking for, how they got the data they did, and how the data were analyzed.
 - vi. Researchers must also be careful when presenting the results from research, especially in a public forum.
3. Since this text's focus is on scholarly research, in the public domain, researchers should not withhold the results of their research unless they honestly believe that releasing the results could be damaging or misleading.
- a. Professional ethics require that scholars be free to examine each other's research; this principle does not always apply to proprietary research.
 - b. One way researchers can subject their work to public scrutiny is to save their data and make them available to fellow researchers who have an honest need for them.
 - i. Researchers have the right to protect themselves from having the fruits of her labor stolen under the guise of a request to examine data.
 - ii. Data should not be destroyed, as in the case of a collegial challenge to the results, thereby allowing the findings to be substantiated.
 - iii. The desire to make research public should not compromise the pledge of privacy that researchers make to research participants.
 - c. There are a number of common statistical methods used to limit disclosure of such information: **Statistical disclosure limitation methods** (in the United States; **statistical disclosure control procedures**, in Europe).
 - i. *Sensitive* cell information when the sample size is so small (e.g., less than 10) is not published as the identity of the research participants more susceptible to discovery (also called *cell suppression*).
4. Research findings are often used by people taking actions that affect society as a whole.
- a. Researchers have the potential to affect the lives of many people.
 - b. Researchers need to consider the effects of their research on the people who use them or are affected by them.
 - c. The potential for the use of research findings to affect people adversely is particularly true for medical research, which is why it is so important to stamp out fraud when it occurs.
 - d. Not all use of research findings is cut and dry in terms of being right or wrong.

III. Conclusion

- A. Ethical research involves important and complicated moral decisions about appropriate modes of conduct throughout the entire research process.
- B. Ethical research particularly requires taking into account the perspective of research participants.
- C. Ethical researchers go to great lengths to collect, analyze, and report their findings carefully and to consider the impact of their research on their research participants and colleagues, as well as society at large.