

# Ethics



(Courtesy National Archives)

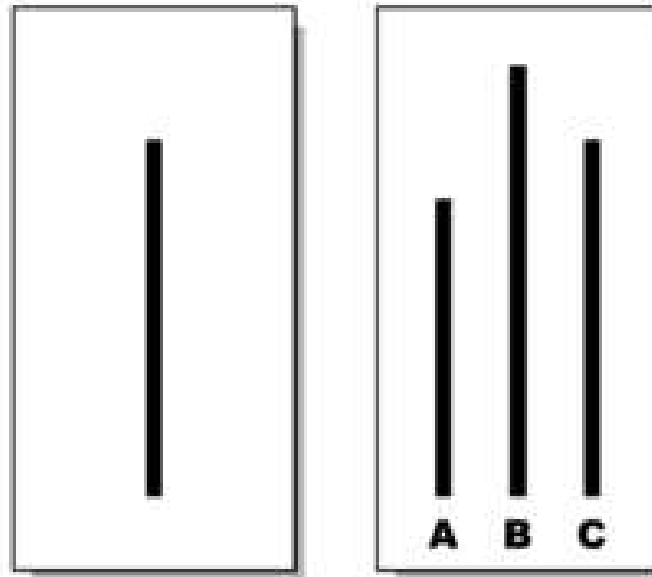
# Tuskegee study

- 1930s, Alabama: US public health service studies the effects of untreated syphilis
- Subjects were:
  - Not told about the purpose of the study, and not told that they had syphilis
  - Given a lumbar puncture (which was misleadingly described as a “special free treatment”)
  - Denied penicillin, even when it became the standard treatment in 1947

# The tea room trade

- 1960s: Humphreys studies sexual behavior in public restrooms
- “He stationed himself in ‘tearooms’ and offered to serve as ‘watchqueen’ - the individual who keeps watch and coughs when a police car stops nearby or a stranger approaches”
- He recorded the licence plates of some participants, and contacted them later as if they were randomly selected for an unrelated public health study.

# Asch: Conformity studies (1950s)



- Subjects chose which line (A, B or C) matched the length of the reference line

# Outline

- Running ethical experiments
  - Respecting subjects
  - Informed consent
  - Institutional Review Boards
- Being an ethical scientist
  - Maintaining the integrity of data
  - Avoiding plagiarism

# Respecting subjects

- Subjects are doing you a favour:
  - Make the experiment as pleasant as possible
  - Don't waste their time by running poorly designed tasks
- Experiments set up a social situation where the experimenter holds the power. We need to make sure not to abuse this power.

# Milgram's Obedience experiments

- “The experiment must go on”

# 8.02 Informed Consent to Research

- Subjects must be informed about:

“(1) the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures

(2) their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun;

(3) the foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing;

(4) reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects;



## 8.02 Informed Consent to Research

- Subjects must be informed about
  - (5) any prospective research benefits;
  - (6) limits of confidentiality;
  - (7) incentives for participation;
  - (8) whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights.”

Is deception OK?

# Is deception OK?

- APA code on Deception in Research
  - Nondeceptive alternatives should be used whenever possible
  - Deception cannot cause pain or emotional distress
  - The deception must be explained as soon as possible

# Avoiding Coercion

- “8.06 Offering Inducements for Research Participation  
(a) Psychologists make reasonable efforts to avoid offering excessive or inappropriate financial or other inducements for research participation when such inducements are likely to coerce participation.”
- Is it OK to get students to participate for course credit?

# Special Populations

Federal regulations describe additional safeguards for studies involving

- Prisoners
- Children

# Institutional Review Boards

- Research projects must be approved by an IRB
- MIT's is called COUHES

# COUHES

- The membership includes:
  - physicians
  - scientists
  - nurses
  - at least one member unaffiliated with MIT and who is not part of the immediate family of a person who is affiliated with the institution
  - at least one member whose primary concerns are in nonscientific areas, such as lawyers, ethicists, and clergy

# Class projects

- Projects need IRB approval when
  - Results will be reported outside of class
  - Data will be archived for possible later use
- When projects aren't reviewed by the IRB, the instructor should make sure that ethical principles are followed



# A puzzle: asking sensitive questions

- I want to interview MIT undergraduates, and find out what proportion of them have used illegal drugs.
- I don't want to know *which* students have used drugs.
- What can I do?

# A puzzle: asking sensitive questions

- Warner, “Randomized response: a survey technique for eliminating evasive answer bias”
- Ask interviewees to roll a die and flip a coin.
  - If the die shows an even number: answer the question “Have you ever used drugs”
  - Otherwise answer the question “Did the coin come up heads”

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# Luk Van Parijs

- October 28, 2005, New Scientist

“A high-flying researcher has been fired from the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston for fabricating data.”

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# Avoiding Plagiarism

Stephen Ambrose

Doris Kearns Goodwin

# Avoiding Plagiarism

- McTaggart, 83

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- Goodwin, 87

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# Conclusions

- Figure out your own ethical position AND follow the official guidelines – both are important.
- Be careful that your data are accurate and that you don't use other people's words without acknowledgment