Ethics in Research
Ethics

- Absolute?
- Situational?

- Durkheim (1925) on complexity of morality
Keys to Ethical Research: Voluntary Participation

- Can a minor consent to a survey? The law actually varies, but wisdom suggests get parental consent.
- Some mentally incapacitated adults cannot assert the right of participation.
- Students in a class: gray area as they may feel pressured to participate.
- What about observation?
Keys to Ethical Research:  
*Do No Harm*

- Identity of respondents must be protected at all costs. This is a moral imperative.
- Is it harmful to identify kinds of people who may be deviant?
- Obviously, “outing” a closeted gay would be harmful and may lead to legal action.
- What if subjects are recognizable in the reporting (*i.e.* an informant in an LA gang study was *killed*)?
Keys to Ethical Research:
Anonymity

- It **must** be impossible to identify respondents, but pure anonymity would mean that the researcher does not know the identity of the subject.
- Note: Complete anonymity is actually very rare (interviews are almost never anonymous), but care must be taken with data after gathered and forever.
- Paradox: anonymity may mean the resulting data is meaningless
Keys to Ethical Research: Confidentiality

- Confidentiality means the researcher \textit{will not} reveal the identity of the subject.
- Ohio sociologist spent four months in jail for refusing to reveal his sources in the drug trade.
- Recommended: Use Double Blind System (destroy intermediate lists!)
Keys to Ethical Research: Deception

• All laboratory research involves lying to some degree, so this is a hard area.
• Some research is simply impossible without deception. Question is: is it important to do so. Medical experiments using placebos are a case in point.
• Real Issue: Is there harm to the subject?
Debriefing

• Is it important to tell the subjects the truth about your study?
• Will it cause more harm than good?
• Is it ethical – not to debrief?
Human Subjects Review Boards

Tuskegee experiment 1932-1972

Now required by Federal law after the infamous Tuskegee Study of syphilis by U.S. Health Department.

Note: social scientists were not originally included in the Human Subjects Review Law, but were thrown in at the last moment for the sake of “equality.”

http://www.dc.peachnet.edu/~shale/humanities/composition/assignments/experiment/tuskegee.html
Classic Ethical Problem #1:

Laud Humphrey’s Early and Controversial Study of Gay Men
Classic Ethical Problem #2:

Classic Ethical Problem #3:
The Philip Zimbardo Prison Experiment (1971) at Stanford.

Details: Go to Zimbardo’s web site and click on Prison Experiment http://www.zimbardo.com/flash.html
Professional Codes

• Merton (1970): priority vs. originality
• Plagiarism
• Bias:
  • Personal
  • Political
  • Financial
Professional Codes

• Data tweaking
• Backwards reasoning (writing up a theory part, making a claim, testing data, finding that the data does NOT support the initial idea, going back and re-writing the theory part to fit the findings) ➞ NOT A GOOD IDEA!
Only *you* are to make the final call on your personal and professional ethics! Rules and review boards do not make ethical people.