CHAPTER **5**
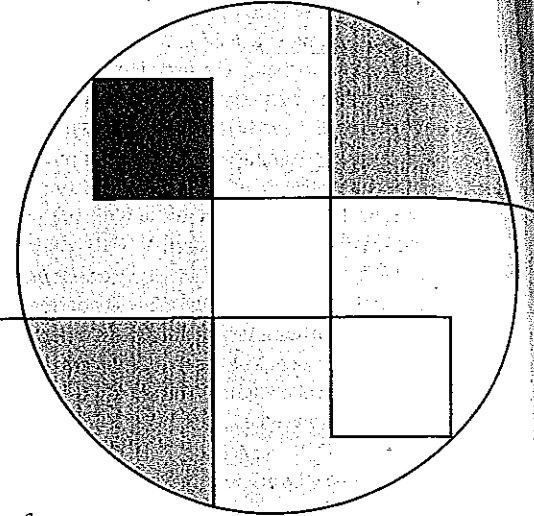
The Ethics of Communication Research

What You'll Learn in This Chapter

Communication research takes place in a social context. Therefore, researchers must take into account many ethical considerations alongside scientific ones in designing and executing their research. Often, however, clear-cut answers to thorny ethical issues are hard to come by.

INTRODUCTION

Our purpose in Part 1 of this book is to present a useful introduction to doing communication research. However, no introduction to research methods in communication could be complete without a discussion of research ethics. You may be saying to yourself "Hey, I'm an ethical person who knows right from wrong, so I don't need a whole chapter on the topic!" But research ethics can be subtle and complicated. Here's a story to illustrate what we mean.

Several years ago, one of us was invited to sit in on a planning session to design a study of legal education in California. The joint project was to be conducted by a university research center and the state bar association. The purpose of the project was to improve legal education by learning which aspects of the law school experience were related to success on the bar exam. Essentially, the plan was to prepare a questionnaire that would get detailed information about the law school experiences of individuals. People would be required to answer the questionnaire when they took the bar exam. By analyzing how people with different kinds of law school experiences did on the bar exam, we could find out what sorts of things worked and what didn't. The findings of the research could be made available to law schools, and legal education could ultimately be improved.

The exciting thing about collaborating with the bar association was that all the normally irritating logistical hassles would be handled. There would be no problem getting permission to administer questionnaires in conjunction with the exam, for example, and the problem of nonresponse could be eliminated altogether.

The prospects for the study were exciting! However, when a colleague was told about it, she said "That's unethical. There's no law requiring the questionnaire, and participation in research has to be voluntary." The study wasn't done.

In retelling this story, it's obvious that requiring participation would have been inappropriate. You may have seen this even before we told you about the colleague's comment. But we had a specific purpose in telling this story.

All of us consider ourselves ethical—not perfect, perhaps, but as ethical as anyone else and perhaps more so than most. The problem in communication research, as probably in life, is that ethical considerations are not always apparent to us. As a result, we often plunge into things without seeing ethical issues that may be apparent to others and may even be obvious to us when pointed out. When the colleague's reactions were reported back to the others in the planning group, for example, no one disagreed with the inappropriateness of requiring participation. Everyone was a bit embarrassed about not having seen it.

Any of us can immediately see that a study that requires small children to be tortured is unethical. We know you'd speak out immediately if we suggested that we interview people about their sexual communication and then publish what they said, by name, in the local newspaper. But, as ethical as you are, you'll totally miss the ethical issues in some other situations—we all do.

This chapter deals with the ethics of communication research. In part, it presents some of the broadly agreed-upon norms describing what's ethical in all social scientific research and what's not. More important than simply knowing the guidelines, however, is becoming sensitized to the ethical component in research so that you'll look for it whenever you plan or read a study. Even when the ethical aspects of a situation are debatable, you should know that there's something to argue about.

THE ORIGINS OF RESEARCHER AGREEMENTS ABOUT ETHICAL CONDUCT

In most dictionaries and in common usage, *ethics* is typically associated with morality, and both deal with matters of right and wrong. But what is right and what wrong? What is the source of the distinction? For individuals, the sources vary. They may be religious doctrines, political ideologies, or the pragmatic observation of what seems to work and what doesn't.

Webster's New World Dictionary is typical among dictionaries in defining *ethical* as "conforming to the standards of conduct of a given profession or group." Although this definition may frustrate those in search of moral absolutes, what we regard as morality and ethics in day-to-day life is a matter of agreement among members of a group. And, not surprisingly, different groups agree on different codes of conduct. Part of living successfully in a particular society is knowing what that society considers ethical and unethical. The same holds true for the community of social scientists, including communication researchers. Anyone involved in social scientific research, then, needs to be aware of the general agreements shared by all social scientists, including communication researchers, about what is proper and improper in the conduct of scientific inquiry. These ethical agreements didn't just materialize out of thin air. So before we

turn to a discussion of each ethical agreement, we want to discuss a brief history of their origins.

Concerns over the treatment of human participants in research arose after evidence of gross mistreatments was made public. Current ethical agreements can be traced to the Nuremberg Code, adopted during the Nuremberg military tribunal on Nazi war crimes after World War II. Civilian and military prisoners in Nazi concentration camps were subjected to freezing; malaria; mustard gas; sulfanilamide; bone, muscle, and nerve transplantations; jaundice; sterilization; spotted fever; various poisons; and phosphorus burns, among other tortures. Many died, and others were permanently maimed; all suffered tremendous physical and psychological pain. (For more on the ethics of Nazi experiments, see http://www.ushmm .org/research/doctors/indiptx.htm.) The Nuremberg Code committed to several ethical principles in the conduct of biomedical research:

- The importance of gaining the voluntary content of research participants
- The avoidance of unnecessary physical or psychological suffering
- The avoidance of research where death or disabling injury was likely
- The commitment to end any experiment if its continuation would likely kill, injure, or disable participants
- The importance of having research conducted only by highly qualified researchers
- The commitment to research only for the good of society

Although the Nuremberg Code applied only to biomedical research, similar codes were developed in the international community for the conduct of social scientific research—for example, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. Over time, the U.S. government has adopted a number of regulations and laws to protect human participants in research (participants are often referred to as "human subjects" in these regulations). Most of the current regulations have evolved from policies developed by the Public Health Service beginning in 1966. In 1974 the National Research Act established the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research. This body significantly expanded the range of regulations and assigned responsibility for ethical conduct to institutional review boards (IRBs) in research institutes and universities. The Department of Health and Human Services issued regulations in 1981 that are still in force, along with subsequent additions and revisions. We'll re-

turn to the topic of IRBs and human subjects regulations later. For now, let's discuss ethical principles that are commonly accepted throughout the biomedical and social scientific research community.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN CONDUCTING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

This section summarizes the four most important ethical agreements that prevail in all social scientific research, including communication research.

Voluntary Participation

Often, though not always, communication research represents an intrusion into people's lives. The interviewer's knock on the door or the arrival of a questionnaire in the mail signals the beginning of an activity that the respondent has not requested and that may require significant time and energy. Participation in a communication experiment disrupts the participant's regular activities.

Moreover, communication research often requires that people reveal personal information about themselves—information that may be unknown to their friends and associates. And communication research often requires that such information be revealed to strangers. Other professionals, such as physicians and lawyers, also ask for such information. However, their requests may be justified by their aims: They need the information in order to serve the personal interests of the respondent. Communication researchers can seldom make this claim. Like medical scientists, they can argue only that the research effort may ultimately help all humanity.

A major tenet of medical research ethics is that experimental participation must be **voluntary.** The same norm applies to communication research. No one should be forced to participate. This norm is far easier to accept in theory than to apply in practice, however. Again, medical research provides a useful parallel. Many experimental drugs are tested on prisoners. In the most rigorously ethical cases, the prisoners are told the nature and the possible dangers of the experiment, they are told that participation is completely voluntary, and they are further instructed that they can expect no special rewards—such as early parole—for participation. Even under these conditions, it's often clear that volunteers are motivated by the belief that they will personally benefit from their cooperation.

When the instructor in an introductory communication class asks students to fill out a questionnaire that he

or she hopes to analyze and publish, students should always be told that their participation in the survey is completely voluntary. Even so, most students will fear that nonparticipation will somehow affect their grade. Therefore, the instructor should be especially sensitive to such implications and make special provisions to eliminate them. For example, the instructor could ensure anonymity by leaving the room while the questionnaires are being completed. Or students could be asked to return the questionnaires by mail or to drop them in a box near the door just before the next class meeting.

This norm of voluntary participation, though, goes directly against several scientific concerns. In the most general terms, the scientific goal of generalizability is threatened if participants in an experiment or survey study are all the kinds of people who willingly participate in such things. Because this orientation probably reflects more general personality traits, the results of the research might not be generalizable to all kinds of people. Most clearly, in the case of a descriptive survey, a researcher cannot generalize the sample survey findings to an entire population unless a substantial majority of the scientifically selected sample actually participates—the willing respondents and the somewhat unwilling.

As you'll see in Chapter 13, field research has its own ethical dilemmas in this regard. Very often, the researcher cannot even reveal that a study is being done, for fear that such a revelation might significantly affect the communication processes being studied. Clearly, the participants in such studies are not given the opportunity to volunteer or refuse to participate.

Although the norm of voluntary participation is important, it is sometimes impossible to follow. In cases where you feel ultimately justified in violating it, it is all the more important that you observe the other ethical norms of scientific research. Furthermore, you are obligated to inform people after their participation that they were observed, usually giving them the option of having their data withdrawn should they feel uncomfortable with the study.

Sometimes, people volunteer to participate and then change their minds once their participation in the study has begun. Whenever possible, research participants should be given the opportunity to withdraw from a study.

No Harm to the Participants

Communication research should never injure the people being studied, regardless of whether they volunteer for the study. Perhaps the clearest instance of this norm in practice concerns the revealing of information that would embarrass participants or endanger their home life, friendships, jobs, and so forth. We'll discuss this aspect of the norm more fully in a moment.

Because participants can be harmed psychologically in the course of a communication research study, the researcher must look for the subtlest dangers and guard against them. Quite often, research participants are asked to reveal deviant behavior, attitudes they feel are unpopular, or personal characteristics that may seem demeaning, such as the absence of friends. Revealing such information usually makes subjects feel uncomfortable at best.

Communication research projects may also force participants to face aspects of themselves that they don't normally consider. This can happen even when the information is not revealed directly to the researcher. In retrospect, a certain past behavior may appear unjust or immoral. The project, then, can cause continuing personal agony for the participant. If the study concerns codes of ethical conduct in everyday communication, for example, the participant may begin questioning his or her own morality, and that personal concern may last long after the research has been completed and reported. Probing questions on any topic can potentially injure a fragile self-esteem.

It should be apparent from this discussion that just about any research you might conduct runs the risk of injuring other people in some way. It isn't possible to guard against all these possible injuries, but some study designs make such injuries more likely than do others. If a particular research procedure seems likely to produce unpleasant effects for participants—asking survey respondents to report deviant behavior, for example—the researcher should have the firmest of scientific grounds for doing it. If the research design is essential and also likely to be unpleasant for participants, you'll find yourself in an ethical netherworld and may go through some personal agonizing. Although agonizing has little value in itself, it may be a healthy sign that you've become sensitive to the problem.

Increasingly, the ethical norms of voluntary participation and no harm to participants have become formalized in the concept of **informed consent**. This means that participants must base their voluntary involvement in research projects on a full understanding of the possible risks involved. In a medical experiment, for example, prospective participants will be presented with a discussion of the experiment and all the possible risks to themselves. They will be required to sign a statement indicating that they are aware of the risks and that they choose to participate anyway. While the value of such a procedure is

obvious when participants will be injected with drugs designed to produce physical effects, for example, it's hardly appropriate when a participant observer rushes to the scene of a demonstration to study communication behavior. The researcher in this latter case is not excused from the norm of not bringing harm to those observed, but gaining informed consent is not the means to achieving that end.

Like voluntary participation, avoiding harm to people is easy in theory but often difficult in practice. However, sensitivity to the issue and experience with its applications should improve the researcher's tact in delicate areas of research. Federal and other funding agencies typically require an independent evaluation of the treatment of human participants for research proposals, and most universities now have human-subject committees to serve this evaluative function. Although sometimes troublesome and inappropriately applied, such requirements not only guard against unethical research but can also reveal ethical issues overlooked by even the most scrupulous researchers.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

The clearest concern in the protection of the participants' interests and well-being is the protection of their identity. If revealing their behavior or responses would injure them in any way, adherence to this norm becomes all the more important. Two techniques—anonymity and confidentiality—assist researchers in this regard, although people often confuse the two.

Anonymity   A research project guarantees anonymity when the researcher—not just the people who read about the research—cannot link a given response to a given participant. This means, for example, that a typical interview respondent can never be considered anonymous because an interviewer collects the information from an identifiable respondent. An example of anonymity is a mail survey in which no identification numbers are put on the questionnaires before their return to the research office.

As we'll see in Chapter 8, on survey research, assuring anonymity can make it difficult to keep track of who has or hasn't returned the questionnaires. Despite this problem, there are some situations in which you may be advised to pay the necessary price. In one study of drug use among university students, for example, one of us decided specifically against knowing the identity of respondents. It was felt that honestly assuring anonymity would increase the likelihood and accuracy of re-

sponses. Also, knowledge of respondent identity would have placed the researcher in the position of being asked by authorities for the names of drug offenders. In the few instances in which respondents volunteered their names, such information was immediately obliterated on the questionnaires.

Confidentiality   A research project guarantees confidentiality when the researcher can identify a given person's responses but essentially promises not to do so publicly. In an interview, for example, the researcher would be in a position to make public the income reported by a given respondent, but the respondent is assured that this will not be done. Whenever a research project is confidential rather than anonymous, it is the researcher's responsibility to make that fact clear to the respondent. Moreover, researchers should never use the term *anonymous* to mean *confidential*.

With few exceptions (such as surveys of public figures who agree to have their responses published), the information that respondents give must at least be kept confidential. This is not always an easy norm to follow because, for example, the courts have not recognized social scientific research data as the kind of "privileged communication" accepted in the case of priests and attorneys.

This unprotected guarantee of confidentiality produced a near disaster in 1991. Two years earlier, the *Exxon Valdez* supertanker had run aground near the port of Valdez in Alaska, spilling ten million gallons of oil into the bay. The economic and environmental damage was widely reported.

Less attention was given to the psychological and sociological damage suffered by residents of the area. There were anecdotal reports of increased alcoholism, family violence, and other secondary consequences of the disruptions caused by the oil spill. Eventually, 22 communities in Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska sued Exxon for the economic, social, and psychological damages suffered by their residents.

To determine the amount of damage done, the communities commissioned a San Diego research firm to undertake a household survey asking residents very personal questions about increased problems in their families. The residents in the sample were asked to reveal painful and embarrassing information under the guarantee of absolute confidentiality. Ultimately, the results of the survey confirmed that a variety of personal and family problems had increased substantially following the oil spill.

When Exxon learned that survey data would be presented to document the suffering, the company took an

ould
sked
few
nes,
the

nfi-
per-
pub-
ould
by a
: this
con-
s re-
lent.
ony-

ures
nfor-
kept
v be-
ocial
:om-
1eys.
pro-
, the
port
into
was

d so-
here
1mily
: dis-
1uni-
sued
lam-

:om-
m to
·per-
·ami-
eveal
1ran-
lts of
fam-
3 the

pre-
)k an

unusual step: It asked the court to subpoena the survey questionnaires! The court granted the defendant's request and ordered the researchers to turn over the questionnaires—with all identifying information. It appeared that Exxon's intention was to call survey respondents to the stand and cross-examine them regarding answers they had given interviewers under the guarantee of confidentiality. Moreover, many of the respondents were Native Americans, whose cultural norms made such public revelations all the more painful.

Happily, the *Exxon Valdez* case was settled before the court decided whether it would force survey respondents to testify in open court. Unhappily, the potential for disaster remains.

The seriousness of this issue is not limited to established research firms. Rik Scarce was a graduate student at Washington State University when he undertook participant observation among animal-rights activists. In 1990, he published a book based on his research titled *Ecowarriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement.* In 1993, Scarce was called before a grand jury and asked to identify the activists he had studied. In keeping with the norm of confidentiality, the young researcher refused to answer the grand jury's questions and spent 159 days in the Spokane County jail.

You can use several techniques to guard against such dangers and ensure better performance on the guarantee of confidentiality. To begin, interviewers and others with access to respondent identifications should be trained in their ethical responsibilities. Beyond training, the most fundamental technique is to remove identifying information as soon as it's no longer necessary. In a survey, for example, all names and addresses should be removed from questionnaires and replaced by identification numbers. An identification file should be created that links numbers to names to permit the later correction of missing or contradictory information, but this file should not be available except for legitimate purposes.

Similarly, in an interview you may need to identify respondents initially so that you can recontact them to verify that the interview was conducted and perhaps to get information that was missing in the original interview. As soon as you've verified an interview and assured yourself that you don't need any further information from the respondent, however, you can safely remove all identifying information from the interview booklet. Often, interview booklets are printed so that the first page contains all the identifiers—it can be torn off once the respondent's identification is no longer needed. J. Steven Picou (1996) points out that even removing identifiers from data files does not always sufficiently protect respondent confidentiality, a lesson he learned during nearly a year in federal court. A careful examination of all the responses of a particular respondent sometimes allows others to deduce that person's identity. Imagine, for example, that someone said he or she was a former employee of a particular company. Knowing the person's gender, age, ethnicity, and other characteristics could make it possible for the company to identify that person.

Even if you intend to remove all identifying information, suppose you have not yet done so. What do you do when the police or a judge orders you to provide the responses given by your research participants?

Deception

We've seen that the handling of participants' identities is an important ethical consideration. Handling your own identity as a researcher can also be tricky. Sometimes it's useful and even necessary to identify yourself as a researcher to those you want to study. You'd have to be an experienced con artist to get people to participate in a laboratory experiment or complete a lengthy questionnaire without letting on that you were conducting research.

Even when you must conceal your research identity, you need to consider the following. Because deceiving people is unethical, deception within social scientific research needs to be justified by compelling scientific or administrative concerns. Even then, the justification will be arguable.

Sometimes, researchers admit that they're doing research but fudge about why they're doing it or for whom. Although it's difficult to conceal the fact that you're conducting research, it's usually a simple—and sometimes appropriate—matter to conceal your purpose or sponsorship. For example, many studies conceal their real purpose in order to avoid eliciting biased responses from study participants. This is especially an issue when the study involves behaviors or attitudes that might be judged as socially desirable or undesirable.

Consider, for example, an experiment designed to test the extent to which people will abandon the evidence of their own observations in favor of the views expressed by others. Figure 5-1 shows the stimulus from the classic Asch experiment in which participants were shown three lines of differing lengths (A, B, and C) and asked to compare them to a fourth line (D). Participants were then asked "Which of the first three lines is the same length as the fourth?"

You'd probably find it a fairly simple task to identify "B" as the correct answer. However, your job would be
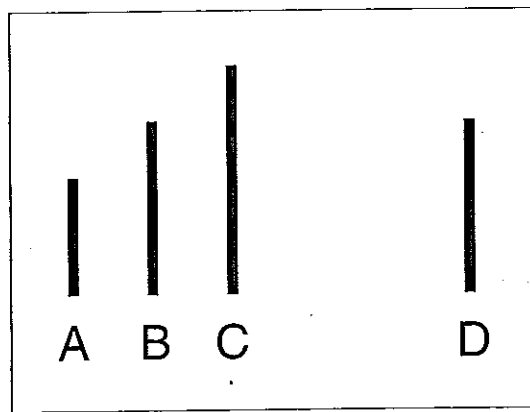
FIGURE 5-1 **Asch Experiment: Lines of Differing Lengths**

complicated by the fact that several other "participants" sitting beside you all agreed that A is the same length as D! In reality, of course, the others in the experiment were all confederates of the researcher, told to agree on the wrong answer. The purpose of the experiment was to see whether you'd give up your own judgment in favor of the group agreement. We think you can see that conformity is a useful phenomenon to study and understand, and it couldn't be studied experimentally without deceiving the participants. We'll examine a similar situation in the discussion of a famous experiment by Stanley Milgram later in this chapter. The question is this: How do we get around the ethical issue that deception is necessary for an experiment to work?

One appropriate solution that researchers have found is to debrief participants following an experiment. **Debriefing** entails interviews to discover any problems generated by the research experience so that those problems can be corrected. Even though participants can't be told the true purpose of the study prior to their participation in it, there's usually no reason they can't know afterward. Telling them the truth afterward may make up for having to lie to them at the outset. This must be done with care, however, making sure that the participants aren't left with bad feelings or doubts about themselves based on their performance in the experiment. If this seems complicated, it's simply the price we pay for using other people's lives as the subject matter for our research.

As a communication researcher, then, you have many ethical obligations to the participants as you conduct your study. But ethical obligations don't end once you have your data in hand.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN ANALYZING AND REPORTING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Ethical concerns do not end with the collection of data from participants. Researchers face ethical issues, as well, in the analysis and reporting of their findings. We will emphasize four issues in particular.

Objectivity and Ideology

In Chapter 1, we suggested that social scientific research can never be totally objective, because researchers are human and therefore necessarily subjective. Science, as a collective enterprise, achieves the equivalent of objectivity through intersubjectivity. That is, different scientists, having different subjective views, can and should arrive at the same results when they employ accepted research techniques. Essentially, this will happen to the extent that each can set personal values and views aside for the duration of the research.

The classic statement on objectivity and neutrality in social science is Max Weber's lecture "Science as a Vocation" (1925/1946). In this talk, Weber urged social scientists to engage in value-free research—that is, research unencumbered by personal values. Liberals and conservatives alike could recognize the "facts" of social science, regardless of how those facts were in accordance with their personal politics.

Many communication researchers have agreed with this abstract ideal, but not all. For example, you may recall from Chapter 3 that researchers from a critical paradigm of knowing have argued that communication research and social action cannot and should not be separated. Explanations of the status quo in society, they contend, shade subtly into defenses of that same status quo. Merely studying the role and function of communication in society without a commitment to making society more humane has been called irresponsible and unethical. For example, in 1997 the *Western Journal of Communication* published a special series of invited essays in which a variety of scholars questioned the ways in which academic research in the communication discipline privileges some perspectives while excluding others. Taken as a whole, this series of essays argued that all research is embedded in social values and that those values reproduce social injustices. Contributors argued that researchers should "own up" to their values and that the research community should work harder to fulfill its ethical obligations to work for the good of society.

Clearly, this issue is not one that we can settle. However, we urge you as a researcher to grapple with the ethical issues raised by researchers who align with the critical paradigm of knowing. It is important for researchers to decide for themselves the extent to which their research functions perpetuate the status quo and the extent to which their research bears an ethical obligation for social action and change.

Protection of Study Participants

Every now and then, research participants read the books published about the studies they participated in. Reasonably sophisticated participants can locate themselves in the various indexes and tables. Having done so, they may find themselves characterized—though not identified by name—as communicatively incompetent, lacking in empathy, and so forth. At the very least, such characterizations are likely to trouble them and threaten their self-images. Yet the whole purpose of the research project may be to explain why some people are communicatively incompetent and others are not. As a researcher, you need to take great care to describe participants in such a way that participants cannot identify themselves, or to provide balanced presentations so that negatives can be offset with positives in your portrayals of them.

One of the most important ways you can protect the identity of your participants is to substitute pseudonyms when you describe particular participants. For example, you may know that a particular participant was "Susan" and her husband was "Sam." However, when you provide a quotation from Susan, you could refer to her as "Samantha" and to her husband as "Henry." However, sometimes, pseudonyms don't work well in protecting participant identity if you provide other details about the participant that enable identification. For example, a statement such as "'Samantha' was the only female employed in top management in this firm. The firm, the only one of its kind where the ABVZ product can be found . . ." allows someone to identify who "Samantha" really is because of two kernels of information provided: the firm (the only one of its kind where a very specific product can be obtained) and the fact that "Samantha" is the only female in top management. Generally, researchers are best served by describing their study participants as a group, rather than individually. When individual descriptions of participants are necessary, they should be worded carefully so that no "insider" could figure out who's who.

The same principle of camouflaged identity applies when dealing with units of analysis other than individu-

als. For example, if you conduct a field study of intercultural communication in a particular town where long-time residents of one cultural heritage face an influx of new residents from a different cultural background, you would be ethically wise to provide the town, as well as its residents, with pseudonyms. The town might be called "Clashville," for example, if cultural clash between these two groups proved to be a prominent theme in your analysis.

Honesty and Integrity

In addition to their ethical obligations to society as a whole and to participants in particular, researchers have ethical obligations to their colleagues in the scientific community. First and foremost, a researcher bears the ethical obligation to be true to his or her data. Even in a qualitative impressionist tale—the narrative form that most reads like a fictionalized story—the researcher is obliged to do his or her best to capture the phenomenon under study with utmost honesty and integrity. Falsification is simply not allowed in good communication research.

In any rigorous study, the researcher should be more familiar than anyone else with the study's technical limitations and failures. Researchers have an obligation to make such shortcomings known to their readers—even if admitting qualifications and mistakes makes them feel foolish. For example, negative findings should be reported if they are at all related to the analysis. There is an unfortunate myth in scientific reporting that only positive discoveries are worth reporting (journal editors are sometimes guilty of believing this as well). In science, however, it's often as important to know that two variables are *not* related as to know that they are.

Similarly, researchers must avoid the temptation to save face by describing their findings as the product of a carefully preplanned analytical strategy when that is not the case. Many findings arrive unexpectedly—even though they may seem obvious in retrospect. An interesting relationship was uncovered by accident—so what? Embroidering such situations with descriptions of fictitious hypotheses is dishonest. It also does a disservice to less-experienced researchers by leading them into thinking that all scientific inquiry is rigorously preplanned and organized.

In general, science progresses through honesty and openness; ego defenses and deception retard it. Researchers can best serve their peers—and scientific discovery as a whole—by telling the truth about what they

observed and all the pitfalls and problems they've experienced in a particular line of inquiry. Perhaps they'll save others from the same problems.

Avoiding Plagiarism

As we discussed in Chapter 2, in writing up a research report you must place your research in the context of what others have done and said. The improper use of their materials is a serious ethical offense. Mastering this matter is a part of your "coming of age" as a scholar.

Whenever you're reporting on the work of others, you must be clear about who said what. That is, you must avoid **plagiarism:** the theft of another's words and/or ideas—whether intentional or accidental—and the presentation of those words and ideas as your own. Because this is a common and sometimes unclear problem, let's take a minute to examine it in some detail. Here are the main ground rules regarding plagiarism:

- You cannot use another writer's exact words without using quotation marks and giving a complete citation, which indicates the source of the quotation such that your reader could locate that quotation in its original context. As a general rule, taking a passage of eight or more words without citation is a violation of federal copyright laws.
- It's also not acceptable to edit or paraphrase another's words and present the revised version as your own work.
- Finally, it's not even acceptable to present another's *ideas* as your own—even if you use totally different words to express those ideas.

The following examples should clarify what is or is not acceptable in the use of another's work.
The Original Work:

Laws of Growth
Systems are like babies: once you get one, you have it. They don't go away. On the contrary, they display the most remarkable persistence. They not only persist; they grow. And as they grow, they encroach. The growth potential of systems was explored in a tentative, preliminary way by Parkinson, who concluded that administrative systems maintain an average growth of 5 to 6 percent per annum regardless of the work to be done. Parkinson was right so far as he goes, and we must give him full honors for initiating the serious study of this important topic. But what Parkinson failed to perceive, we now enunciate—the general systems analogue of Parkinson's Law.

The System Itself Tends to Grow at 5 to 6 Percent per Annum

Again, this Law is but the preliminary to the most general possible formulation, the Big-Bang Theorem of Systems Cosmology.

Systems Tend to Expand to Fill the Known Universe (Gall, 1975, pp. 12–14)

Now let's look at some of the *acceptable* ways you might make use of Gall's work in your own paper:

- Acceptable: One scholar draws a humorous parallel between systems and infants: "Systems are like babies: once you get one, you have it. They don't go away. On the contrary, they display the most remarkable persistence. They not only persist; they grow" (Gall, 1975, p. 12).
- Acceptable: Gall (1975, p. 12) warns that systems are like babies. Create a system, and it sticks around. Worse yet, Gall notes, systems keep growing larger and larger.
- Acceptable: It has also been suggested that systems have a natural tendency to persist, even grow and encroach (Gall, 1975, p. 12).

Here now are some *unacceptable* uses of the same material, reflecting some common errors:

- Unacceptable: In this paper, I want to look at some of the characteristics of the social systems we create in our organizations. First, systems are like babies: once you get one, you have it. They don't go away. On the contrary, they display the most remarkable persistence. They not only persist; they grow. [It is unacceptable to quote directly someone else's materials without using quotation marks and giving a full citation.]
- Unacceptable: In this paper, I want to look at some of the characteristics of the social systems we create in our organizations. First, systems are a lot like children: once you get one, it's yours. They don't go away; they persist. They not only persist, in fact: they grow. [It is unacceptable to edit another's work and present it as your own.]
- Unacceptable: In this paper, I want to look at some of the characteristics of the social systems we create in our organizations. One thing I've noticed is that once you create a system, it never seems to go away. Just the opposite, in fact: they have a tendency to grow. You might say systems are a lot like children in that respect. [It is unacceptable to paraphrase someone else's ideas and present them as your own.]

Each of the preceding unacceptable examples is an example of plagiarism and represents a serious offense. Admittedly, there are some "gray areas." Some ideas are more or less in the public domain, not "belonging" to any one person. Or you may develop an idea on your own that someone else has already put in writing. If you have a question about a specific situation, discuss it with your instructor before you prepare your paper.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

As we mentioned earlier, the issue of research ethics in studies involving humans is now governed by federal law (the "Protection of Human Subjects" law may be found online at http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm). Any agency (such as a university or a hospital) wishing to receive federal research support must establish an "institutional review board" (IRB), a panel of faculty (and possibly others) who review all research proposals involving human participants so that they can guarantee that the participants' rights and interests will be protected. The law applies specifically to federally funded research, but many universities apply the same standards and procedures to all research, including that funded by nonfederal sources and even research done at no cost, such as student projects.

The chief responsibility of an IRB is to ensure that the risks faced by human participants in research are minimal. In some cases, the IRB may ask the researcher to revise the study design; in other cases, the IRB may refuse to approve a study. Where some minimal risks are deemed unavoidable, researchers are required to prepare

an "informed consent" form that describes those risks clearly. Participants may be involved in the study only after they have read the statement and signed it as an indication that they know the risks and voluntarily accept them.

In order for an IRB to evaluate a proposed study for its ethics, a researcher must prepare an IRB proposal. Typically, this is an abbreviated research proposal organized around core questions. Figure 5-2 presents a list of questions that appear in a typical IRB proposal form. Figure 5-3 presents a sample "Informed Consent" form, submitted as part of the IRB proposal for one of the research projects one of us recently conducted on communication in stepfamilies (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2001). Participants in this interview study read and signed the informed consent document before the interview could begin.

Much of the impetus for establishing IRBs had to do with biomedical experimentation on humans, and many social scientific research study designs are generally regarded as exempt from IRB review. An example is an anonymous survey sent to a large sample of respondents. The guidelines to be followed by IRBs, as contained in the Federal Exemption Categories (45 CFR 46.101 [b]), exempt a variety of research situations:

(1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

---

1. Who are the researchers affiliated with the project, and what are their qualifications to conduct research?
2. Who is sponsoring the research?
3. Does the project involve special populations (under 18 minors; pregnant women/fetuses; cognitively impaired persons; prisoners) whose human rights require extra protections?
4. How will participants be recruited? What is the exact language that will appear in any advertisements or announcements for volunteers?
5. How will informed consent be obtained? What is the exact language that will appear in the informed consent document?
6. What is the purpose of the study?
7. What are the procedures involved in the study? What exact measures will be used? What exact questions will be asked? Will deception be employed?
8. What methods will be used to protect participant confidentiality?
9. What emotional, psychological, legal, social, financial, and/or physical risks are possible for participants? What measures will be undertaken to minimize these risks?
10. What are the benefits of the study to participants and/or to society as a whole?

FIGURE 5-2   **Questions Included in a Typical IRB Review Form**

Project Title: Perceptions of Communication in Stepfamilies

Principal Investigators: Leslie A. Baxter, Professor, Communication Studies, University of Iowa
Amy Wagner, doctoral student, Communication Studies, University of Iowa

PURPOSE

This study involves research. The purpose of the research is to solicit perceptions of what communication is like in stepfamilies among young-adult stepchildren.

We are inviting people to participate in this research because they have voluntarily expressed an interest in being interviewed and are eligible for participation. Eligibility includes being part of a stepfamily for no less than 4 years and living in the same home as that family for the majority of that time. Because we are interested in interviewing people who can recall what happened in their stepfamily, we are seeking participants whose stepfamilies did not begin before they are able to recall what happened; for most people, this probably means a stepfamily that began no more than 10 years ago. This project will last for 45–60 minutes.

PROCEDURES

Those agreeing to participate can expect the following to occur. After completing this Informed Consent Form, we will turn on the tape recorder to record the interview. You will first be asked to complete a "Family Tree" sheet that provides us with a demographic sketch of who is in your stepfamily and in your original biological or adoptive family; only first names will be listed. This sheet helps the interviewer keep various family members straight during the interview. Next, you will be asked to fill out a 30-item questionnaire that asks you questions about how your stepfamily functions. Next, we will ask you to describe the formation and development of your stepfamily. Last, we will ask you to tell us about the most positive aspects and the most challenging aspects of communication in your stepfamily, including various members of your stepfamily. There are no right or wrong answers here; we are simply interested in your perceptions.

RISKS

This section of the form describes possible risks that might accompany participation in the study. Because we are asking you to think aloud about the challenging aspects of communication in your stepfamily, this may cause you some discomfort. You are free not to answer any question that is asked of you, should you choose. In addition, you are free to withdraw from participating in the study at any time, should you choose. If you would like a referral to a professional counselor who could talk to you about your stepfamily experiences, please feel free to contact Dr. Leslie Baxter, principal investigator, and she can put you in contact with appropriate services. Her phone number is xxx-xxxx, e-mail address is xxxxxxxxxxxx.

BENEFITS

There may be no personal benefits for participating in this study, beyond the experience of sharing experiences with the interviewer. However, it is hoped that, in the future, society could benefit from this study because of the information we may gain about communication among stepfamily members.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

There will not be any costs to the participant for being involved in this research project. Participants will be compensated for their time and inconvenience for participating in the study. If a participant signed up for participation in exchange for extra credit, the instructor of the appropriate course will be notified before the end of the current semester. If a participant signed up for participation after referral by someone else, their name will be entered into a lottery, the winner of which will receive a free coupon for a dinner-for-two at a local Iowa City restaurant.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records of participation in this research project will be maintained and kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board may inspect and copy a subject's records pertaining to the research, and these records may contain personal identifiers.

FIGURE 5-3   A Sample Informed Consent Form

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

(3) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt

The interview will be audiotaped. By initialing in the space provided below, you are verifying that you have been told that audio materials will be generated during the course of this study. These recordings will be used for purposes of obtaining a complete record of the interview. The audiotapes of the interview will not contain any personal identifiers that could be linked to the participant or his/her stepfamily; only first names will be allowed throughout the interview and participants are free to use pseudonyms if they desire. The tapes will be transcribed by the principal investigator and her assistants, and then the tapes will be destroyed. No personal identifiers will be linked to the transcripts.

_____ Subject's initials

The demographics sheet and questionnaire will not contain personal identifiers and will be linked to the interview only through a common interview number. Participants receiving extra credit will record their ID# on a separate extra credit sheet that will be given to the appropriate course instructor; no link will be made between this record and the interview. Participants who are eligible for enrollment in the lottery will record their name, mailing address, and phone number on a separate lottery ticket, which the participant will place in the entry box so that a winner can be drawn at the conclusion of the study; this lottery ticket will not be linked in any way to the interview. In the event of any report or publication from this study, the identity of subjects will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner in such a way that subjects cannot be identified.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

All participation is voluntary. There is no penalty to anyone who decides not to participate. Nor will anyone be penalized if he or she decides to stop participation at any time during the research project. You can elect not to answer a given question that is asked of you simply by leaving it blank or by telling the interviewer you do not want to answer that question. You can elect to withdraw completely from the study at any point, should you choose, simply by notifying the interviewer. You will forfeit your extra credit or lottery enrollment should you withdraw completely from the study.

QUESTIONS

Questions are encouraged. If there are any questions about this research project, please contact Professor Leslie A. Baxter, Communication Studies Department, phone xxxxxxx, e-mail address xxxxxxxxx. Questions about the rights of research subjects or research related injury may be addressed to the Human Subjects Office, xxxxxxxxxxxxx.

Subject's name (printed) _____

Signature of subject _____

Date _____

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I have discussed the above points with the subject or the legally authorized representative, using a translator when necessary. It is my opinion that the subject understands the risks, benefits, and obligations involved in participation in this project.

Signature of Investigator _____

Date _____

Note: This is the approved Informed Consent form used by Leslie Baxter and Amy Wagner to gather data subsequently analyzed and reported (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2001). Because this research project involved a team of researchers from two different institutions, researchers associated with the second institution were required to submit a separate IRB form, including an Informed Consent form, to their IRB.

FIGURE 5-3   **A Sample Informed Consent Form (*continued*)**

under paragraph (b)(2) of this section, if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) Federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

(4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

(5) Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of Department or Agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) Public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under

those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.

(6) Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Paragraph (2) of the excerpt exempts some of the communication research described in this book. However, it is typically not the researcher who independently determines whether his or her research project is exempt from IRB review. Often, a researcher is required by his or her university to submit a research proposal to the IRB, or some representative thereof, so that it can be judged exempt from full formal review by the board.

What guides the conduct of research sponsored outside the auspices of a research institute or university—say, a consulting firm not eligible for federal research monies that engages in contracted proprietary research? Most professional associations have professional codes of ethics to guide researchers who are not otherwise controlled by IRBs.

PROFESSIONAL CODES OF ETHICS

Ethical issues in communication research are both important and ambiguous. For this reason, most of the professional associations of communication researchers rely on formal codes of conduct describing what is considered acceptable and unacceptable professional behavior. As one example, Figure 5-4 presents the code of conduct of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), an interdisciplinary research association in the social sciences to which some communication researchers belong. Most professional associations have such codes of ethics, and they are quite similar to one another in their commitment to the core principles of ethical conduct we discussed earlier in the chapter. You can find many of these on the associations' web sites.

TWO ETHICAL CONTROVERSIES

As you may already have guessed, the adoption and publication of professional codes of conduct have not totally resolved the issue of research ethics. Researchers still disagree on some general principles, and those who agree in principle often debate specifics. This section briefly describes two research projects that have provoked ethical controversy and discussion throughout the social sciences. The first project studied homosexual behavior in public restrooms, and the second examined obedience in a laboratory setting.

Trouble in the Tearoom

As a graduate student, Laud Humphreys became interested in the study of homosexual behavior. He developed a special interest in the casual and fleeting same-sex acts engaged in by some male nonhomosexuals. In particular, his research interest focused on homosexual acts between strangers meeting in the public restrooms in parks, called "tearooms" among homosexuals. The result was the publication in 1970 of *Tearoom Trade.*

What particularly interested Humphreys about the tearoom activity was that the participants seemed otherwise to live conventional lives as "family men": accepted members of the community. They did nothing else that might qualify them as homosexuals. Thus, it was important to them that they remain anonymous in their tearoom visits. How would you study something like that?

Humphreys decided to take advantage of the social structure of the situation. Typically, the tearoom encounter involved three people: the two men actually engaging in the sexual act and a lookout, called the "watchqueen." Humphreys began showing up at public restrooms, offering to serve as watchqueen whenever it seemed appropriate. Since the watchqueen's payoff was the chance to watch the action, Humphreys was able to conduct field observations as he would in a study of political rallies or jaywalking behavior at intersections.

To round out his understanding of the tearoom trade, Humphreys needed to know something more about the people who participated. Since the men probably would not have been thrilled about being interviewed, Humphreys developed a different solution. Whenever possible, he noted the license numbers of participants' cars and tracked down their names and addresses through the police. Humphreys then visited the men at their homes, disguising himself enough to avoid recognition, and announced that he was conducting a survey. In that fashion,

CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND PRACTICES

We, the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, subscribe to the principles expressed in the following code.

Our goal is to support sound practice in the profession of public opinion research. (By public opinion research we mean studies in which the principal source of information about individual beliefs, preferences, and behavior is a report given by the individual himself or herself.)

We pledge ourselves to maintain high standards of scientific competence and integrity in our work, and in our relations both with our clients and with the general public. We further pledge ourselves to reject all tasks or assignments which would be inconsistent with the principles of this code.

THE CODE

I. *Principles of Professional Practice in the Conduct of Our Work*

  A. We shall exercise due care in gathering and processing data, taking all reasonable steps to assume the accuracy of results.

  B. We shall exercise due care in the development of research designs and in the analysis of data.

    1. We shall employ only research tools and methods of analysis which, in our professional judgment, are well suited to the research problem at hand.

    2. We shall not select research tools and methods of analysis because of their special capacity to yield a desired conclusion.

    3. We shall not knowingly make interpretations of research results, nor shall we tacitly permit interpretations, which are inconsistent with the data available.

    4. We shall not knowingly imply that interpretations should be accorded greater confidence than the data actually warrant.

  C. We shall describe our findings and methods accurately and in appropriate detail in all research reports.

II. *Principles of Professional Responsibility in Our Dealings with People*

  A. The Public:

    1. We shall cooperate with legally authorized representatives of the public by describing the methods used in our studies.

    2. We shall maintain the right to approve the release of our findings whether or not ascribed to us. When misinterpretation appears, we shall publicly disclose what is required to correct it, notwithstanding our obligation for client confidentiality in all other respects.

  B. Clients or Sponsors:

    1. We shall hold confidential all information obtained about the client's general business affairs and about the findings of research conducted for the client, except when the dissemination of such information is expressly authorized.

    2. We shall be mindful of the limitations of our techniques and facilities and shall accept only those research assignments which can be accomplished within these limitations.

  C. The Profession:

    1. We shall not cite our membership in the Association as evidence of professional competence, since the Association does not so certify any persons or organizations.

    2. We recognize our responsibility to contribute to the science of public opinion research and to disseminate as freely as possible the ideas and findings which emerge from our research.

  D. The Respondent:

    1. We shall not lie to survey respondents or use practices and methods which abuse, coerce, or humiliate them.

    2. We shall protect the anonymity of every respondent, unless the respondent waives such anonymity for specified uses. In addition, we shall hold as privileged and confidential all information which tends to identify the respondent.

FIGURE 5-4   Code of Conduct of the American Association for Public Opinion Research
Source: American Association for Public Opinion Research, *By-Laws* (May 1977). Used by permission.

he collected the personal information he couldn't get in the restrooms.

As you can imagine, Humphreys's research provoked considerable controversy both inside and outside the social scientific community. Some critics charged Humphreys with a gross invasion of privacy in the name of science. What men did in public restrooms was their own business. Others were mostly concerned about the deceit involved—Humphreys had lied to the participants by leading them to believe he was only a voyeur. Even

people who felt that the tearoom participants were fair game for observation because they used a public facility protested the follow-up survey. They felt it was unethical for Humphreys to trace the participants to their homes and to interview them under false pretenses.

Still others justified Humphreys's research. The topic, they said, was worth study. It couldn't be studied any other way, and they regarded the deceit as essentially harmless, noting that Humphreys was careful not to harm his participants by disclosing their tearoom activities.

The tearoom trade controversy has never been resolved. It's still debated, and it probably always will be, since it stirs emotions and involves ethical issues that people disagree about. What do you think? Was Humphreys ethical in doing what he did? Are there parts of the research that you believe were acceptable and other parts that were not?

Observing Human Obedience

The second illustration differs from the first in many ways. Whereas Humphreys's study involved participant observation (a method we describe in detail in Chapter 13), the setting of this study was in the laboratory. And whereas Humphreys examined behavior considered by some to be a form of deviance, the researcher in this study examined obedience and conformity.

One of the more unsettling clichés to come out of World War II was the German soldier's common excuse for atrocities: "I was only following orders." From the point of view that gave rise to this comment, any behavior—no matter how reprehensible—could be justified if someone else could be assigned responsibility for it. If a superior officer ordered a soldier to kill a baby, the fact of the order supposedly exempted the soldier from personal responsibility for the action. Although the military tribunals that tried the war crime cases did not accept this excuse, researchers and others have recognized the extent to which this point of view pervades social life. People often seem willing to do things they know would be considered wrong by others if they can claim that some higher authority ordered them to do it. Such was the pattern of justification in the My Lai tragedy of Vietnam, when U.S. soldiers killed more than 300 unarmed civilians—some of them young children—simply because their village, My Lai, was believed to be a Viet Cong stronghold. This sort of justification appears less dramatically in day-to-day civilian life. Few would disagree that this reliance on authority exists, yet Stanley Milgram's study (1963, 1965) of the topic provoked considerable controversy.

To observe people's willingness to harm others when following orders, Milgram brought 40 adult men from many different walks of life into a laboratory setting designed to create the phenomenon under study. If you had been a participant in the experiment, you would have had something like the following experience.

You've been informed that you and another person are about to participate in a learning experiment. Through a draw of lots, you're assigned the job of "teacher" and your fellow participant the job of "pupil." The "pupil" is led into another room and strapped into a chair; an electrode is attached to his wrist. As the teacher, you're seated in front of an impressive electrical control panel covered with dials, gauges, and switches. You notice that each switch has a label giving a different number of volts, ranging from 15 to 315. The switches have other labels, too, some with the ominous phrases "Extreme-Intensity Shock," "Danger—Severe Shock," and "XXX."

The experiment runs like this: You read a list of word pairs to the learner and then test his ability to match them up. Because you can't see him, a light on your control panel indicates his answer. Whenever the learner makes a mistake, you're instructed by the experimenter to throw one of the switches—beginning with the mildest—and administer a shock to your pupil. Through an open door between the two rooms, you hear your pupil's response to the shock. Then you read another list of word pairs and test him again.

As the experiment progresses, you administer ever more intense shocks, until your pupil screams for mercy and begs for the experiment to end. You're instructed to administer the next shock anyway. After a while, your pupil begins kicking the wall between the two rooms and continues to scream. The implacable experimenter tells you to give the next shock. Finally, you read a list and ask for the pupil's answer—but there is no reply whatever, only silence from the other room. The experimenter informs you that no answer is considered an error and instructs you to administer the next higher shock. This continues up to the "XXX" shock at the end of the series.

What do you suppose you really would have done when the pupil first began screaming? When he began kicking on the wall? Or when he became totally silent and gave no indication of life? You'd refuse to continue giving shocks, right? And surely the same would be true of most people.

So we might think—but Milgram found out otherwise. Of the first 40 adult men Milgram tested, nobody refused to continue administering the shocks until they heard the pupil begin kicking the wall between the two rooms. Of the 40, 5 did so then. Two-thirds of the subjects, 26 of the

40, continued doing as they were told through the entire series—up to and including the administration of the highest shock.

As you've probably guessed, the shocks were phony, and the "pupil" was a confederate of the experimenter. Only the "teacher" was a real participant in the experiment. As a participant, you wouldn't actually have been hurting another person, but you would have been led to think you were. The experiment was designed to test your willingness to follow orders to the point of presumably killing someone.

Milgram's experiments have been criticized both methodologically and ethically. On the ethical side, critics have particularly cited the effects of the experiment on the participants. Many seem to have experienced personally about as much pain as they thought they were administering to someone else. They pleaded with the experimenter to let them stop giving the shocks. They became extremely upset and nervous. Some had uncontrollable seizures.

How do you feel about this research? Do you think the topic was important enough to justify such measures? Would debriefing the participants be sufficient to ameliorate any possible harm? Can you think of other ways the researcher might have examined obedience?

This chapter concludes our introduction to communication research. We have considered how social scientific research about communication is, and is not, like everyday inquiry. We have introduced the two pillars of good science: logic and observation. We have introduced you to the process of planning a research study and the importance of a literature review in that undertaking. We have discussed how researchers from different paradigms of knowing approach the research enterprise differently. Despite their differences, we have realized that all researchers embrace both deductive and inductive reasoning. Last, we have emphasized the ethical backdrop against which all communication should be evaluated. We now turn to a detailed treatment of the primary kinds of communication research—quantitative and qualitative. As we have emphasized in this part of the book, we see quantitative and qualitative research as two sides of the same coin and strongly encourage researchers to engage in multi-method research, in which both kinds of research are employed. However, to simplify our presentation, we are going to divide our discussion into two parts: Part 2, devoted to quantitative communication research, and Part 3, devoted to qualitative communication research.

Main Points

□ What is ethical and unethical in research is ultimately a matter of what a community of people agree is right and wrong.

□ Researchers agree that participation in research should normally be voluntary. However, this norm can conflict with the scientific need for generalizability.

□ Researchers agree that research should not harm those who participate in it unless they willingly and knowingly accept the risks of harm by giving their informed consent.

□ Whereas anonymity refers to the situation in which even the researcher cannot link specific information to the individuals it describes, confidentiality refers to the situation in which the researcher promises to keep information about participants private. The most straightforward way to ensure confidentiality is to destroy identifying information as soon as it's no longer needed.

□ Many research designs involve a greater or lesser degree of deception of participants. Because deceiving people violates common standards of ethical behavior, deception in research requires a strong justification—and even then the justification may be challenged.

□ Researchers have ethical obligations in analyzing and reporting their data, in addition to the obligations that guide the conduct of research. Depending on a researcher's paradigm of knowing, he or she may have an ethical obligation to use research to bring about social change. All communication researchers should strive to protect the identity of their participants in their reporting of findings. Communication researchers are ethically bound to display both honesty and integrity in their analysis and reporting of data. Finally, they are ethically obligated to write in a manner that credits others appropriately for their ideas and words.

□ Institutional review boards (IRBs) evaluate proposed research when researchers are affiliated with research institutes or universities.

❏ Professional associations in several disciplines publish codes of ethics to guide researchers. These codes are necessary and helpful, but they do not resolve all ethical questions.

❏ Laud Humphreys's study of "tearoom" encounters and Stanley Milgram's study of obedience raise ethical issues that are debated to this day.

Key Terms

IRB (institutional review board) confidentiality
voluntary participation debriefing
informed consent plagiarism
anonymity

Review Questions and Exercises

1. Review the discussion of the Milgram experiment on obedience. How would you design a study to accomplish the same purpose while avoiding the ethical criticisms leveled at Milgram? Would your design be equally valid? Would it have the same effect?

2. Another very famous study from the standpoint of research ethics is the Stanford Prison Experiment. Visit this web site to read about the study as it unfolded: www.prisonexp.org. When, if at all, would you have closed the study on ethical grounds? On what ethical grounds is your decision based?

3. Evaluate the following examples with respect to their research ethics:

   a. A communication instructor asks students in an introductory communication class to complete questionnaires needed in order for the instructor to complete her dissertation and graduate on time.

   b. After a field study of the interaction between pro-choice and pro-life protestors at an abortion clinic, law enforcement officials demand that the researcher identify those people who were observed to engage in violence. Rather than risk arrest as an accomplice after the fact, the researcher complies.

   c. After completing the final draft of a book reporting a research project, the researcher/author discovers that 25 of the 2,000 survey interviews were falsified by interviewers but chooses to ignore that fact and publishes the book anyway.

   d. Researchers obtain a list of "problem employees" provided by corporate management. They contact the employees with the explanation that each has been selected "at random" from among the corporation's employees to take a sampling of "employee opinion."

   e. A college instructor who wants to test the effect of unfair berating administers an hour exam to both sections of a specific course. The overall performance of the two sections is essentially the same. The grades of one section are artificially lowered, however, and the instructor berates them for performing so badly. The instructor then administers the same final exam to both sections and discovers that the performance of the unfairly berated section is worse. The hypothesis is confirmed, and the research report is published.

   f. In a study of sexual behavior, the investigator wants to overcome participants' reluctance to report what they might regard as shameful behavior. To get past their reluctance, participants are asked "Everyone masturbates now and then; about how much do you masturbate?"

   g. A researcher studying roommate communication in campus dorms discovers that 60 percent of the residents regularly violate restrictions on alcohol consumption. Publication of this finding would probably create a furor in the campus community. Because no extensive analysis of alcohol use is planned, the researcher decides to ignore the finding and keep it quiet.

   h. To test the extent to which people may try to save face by expressing attitudes on matters they are wholly uninformed about, the researcher asks for their attitudes regarding a fictitious issue.

   i. A researcher's questionnaire is circulated among students as part of their registration packet. Although students are not told they must complete the questionnaire, the hope is that they will believe they must—thus ensuring a higher completion rate.

   j. A field researcher pretends to join a radical political group in order to understand its communication strategies and is successfully accepted as a member of the inner planning circle. State what you think the researcher should do if the group makes plans for the following: (1) a peaceful, though illegal, demonstration; (2) the bombing of a public building during a time it is sure to be unoccupied; (3) the assassination of a public official.

Continuity Project

In 1994, Carole Blair and her colleagues published an essay titled "Disciplining the Feminine," in which they argued that some of the research practices in the communication discipline reproduced a masculinist ideology. They argued that such practices functioned to exclude other voices, particularly feminist ones. Read their essay and react to it in light of the ethical issues discussed in this chapter, especially the "Objectivity and Ideology" section.

Additional Readings

Bower, R. T., & de Gasparis, P. (1978). *Ethics in social research: Protecting the interests of human subjects.* New York: Praeger. This study provides an excellent overview of the ethical issues involved in social scientific research and discusses the ways those issues are dealt with. It contains an extensive bibliography.

Lee, R. (1993). *Doing research on sensitive topics.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage. This book examines the conflicts between scientific research needs and the rights of the people involved— with guidelines for dealing with such conflicts.

Picou, J. S., Gill, D. A., & Cohen, M. J. (Eds.) (1999). *The* Exxon Valdez *disaster: Readings on a modern social problem.* Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt. An interesting book on all facets of the disaster, including the ethical obligations of researchers who studied the matter.

Scarce, R. (1994). (No) trial, (but) tribulations: When courts and ethnography conflict. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 23,* 123–149. A more detailed discussion of Scarce's experiences with the court when he refused to turn over his field notes when they were subpoenaed.

InfoTrac College Edition
http://www.infotrac-college.com/
wadsworth/access.html

Access the latest news and journal articles with InfoTrac College Edition, an easy-to-use online database of reliable, full-length articles from hundreds of top academic journals. Conduct an electronic search using the following search terms:
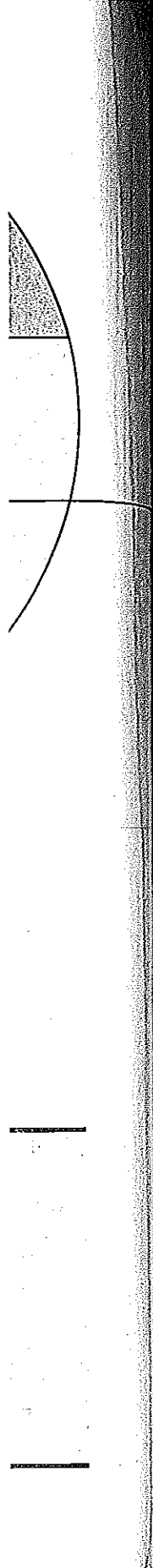
- anonymity
- code of ethics
- confidentiality
- informed consent
- IRB (institutional review board)
- plagiarism

PART **2**
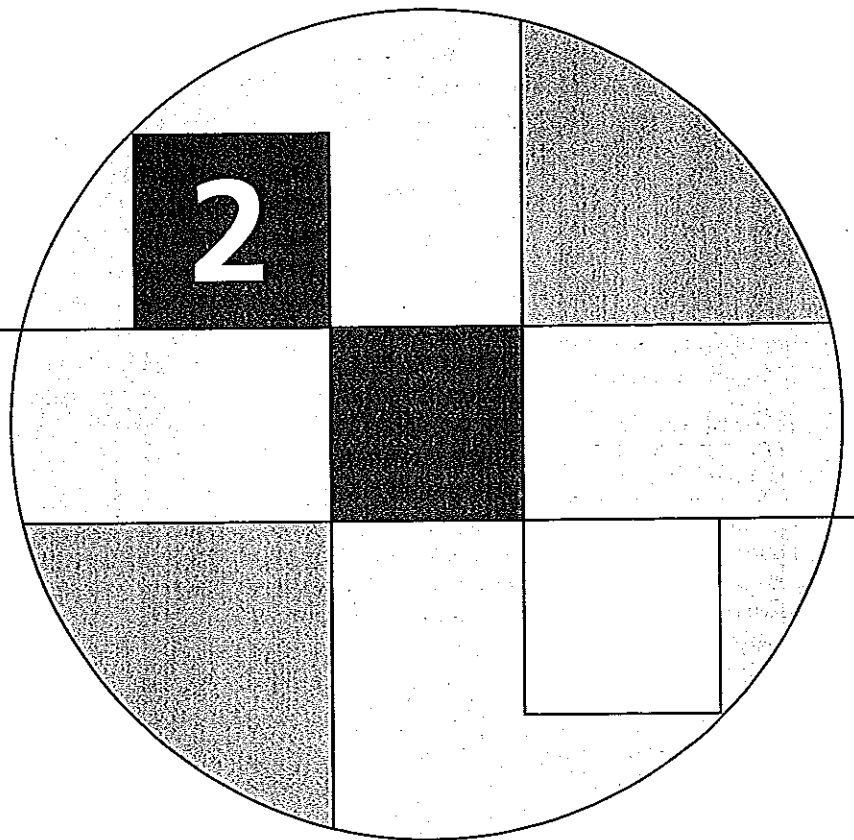
Quantitative Communication Research

The introductory issues addressed in Part 1 of the book are integral to the research process, whether quantitative or qualitative. Although quantitative research and qualitative research share many things in common, we are separating them for purposes of in-depth discussion. In this part of the book, we'll consider communication research that is quantitative in nature. These methods are typically used by researchers who adopt positivist or systems perspectives on communication. In Part 3 of the book, we'll turn to qualitative methods, often used by interpretive and critical communication researchers. This division is somewhat arbitrary on our part—as we have indicated before, we think the strongest communication research is multi-method, in which both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to study a given communication phenomenon.

All researchers agree that research must meet the standard of trustworthiness. Put simply, all researchers want to persuade their audiences that the findings of their research are believable and should be taken seriously. When researchers plan a research study, they make careful methodological decisions with this criterion in mind. As consumers of others' research, we ask ourselves if we can believe a study's findings. But what makes one study trustworthy and another less so? The criteria by which trustworthiness is judged differ somewhat for quantitative research and qualitative research. At this point, we want to introduce you to the criteria by which most quantitative research is judged trustworthy (or not). We urge you to keep these criteria in mind as you read the chapters in this part of the book.

Four criteria are important in evaluating the trustworthiness of quantitatively oriented communication research: internal validity, measurement reliability, measurement validity, and external validity.

INTERNAL VALIDITY

Internal validity addresses the "truth value" of a study's findings. How can you establish confidence in the "truth" of the findings? This criterion is used in evaluating the research design employed by the researcher. With a goal of description, the issue of internal validity revolves around the researcher's conceptualization and operationalization of the study's variables. With a goal of explanation, internal validity refers to the extent to which variations in the dependent (outcome) variable can be attributed to the independent variable within the confines of a given study. Thus, an explanatory study has high internal validity if its methods allow the researcher to make a confident claim about what caused a certain outcome in the study. With a goal of functional explanation, internal validity refers to the extent to which the researcher can be confident in identifying how system parts function as a whole in sustaining dynamic equilibrium for the system.

What can get in the way of a study's internal validity? Social science researchers have identified three broad categories of threats to internal validity. First, a study's claims can be threatened by researcher-related factors. For example, in an interview, a participant may answer questions based on the appearance of the person conducting the interview. Second, a study's claims can be threatened by participant-related factors. Participants may be highly motivated to provide what they think is a socially desirable answer, for instance. Or participants might grow tired or bored with the study and cease giving it their full attention. Third, a researcher's claims can be threatened by the research procedures used in the study. For example, a survey researcher could pose a question in a confusing or biased manner, thereby reaping an invalid response from the participants. Or a researcher interested in causal explanation could fail to control for alternative explanations for why two variables, X and Y, are correlated to each other in addition to the possibility that X is a cause of Y. In discussing the three primary methods used in quantitative communication research—surveys, experiments, and quantitative text analysis—we're going to elaborate on the ways researchers try to minimize these threats to internal validity.

Chapter 8 examines in depth one of the most frequently used methods in communication research—the survey. Whether a paper-and-pencil questionnaire or a structured interview, survey research is designed to elicit people's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions, self-reports of their behaviors, and self-reports of their behavioral intentions. Survey research is a primary form of measurement in quantitative communication research, and our concern is how to maximize the trustworthiness of claims made using this method.

Chapter 9 examines a primary method employed to examine questions of cause and effect: the experiment. Experiments are usually thought of in connection with the physical sciences, but in this chapter, we'll see how communication researchers use experiments. This is the most rigorously controllable of the methods we'll examine. We'll emphasize trustworthiness again in this chapter.

Chapter 10 is devoted to two methods commonly known as quantitative text analysis—content analysis and interaction analysis. These two methods quantify content, themes, or functions of messages of a variety of types—from face-to-face talk to TV programs to music lyrics. We'll examine how these methods can lead to trustworthy conclusions.

A particular subset of procedural threats deals with the conceptualizations and operationalizations, or measures, of a study's variables. Two special criteria are used in judging the trustworthiness of a study's measures—measurement reliability and measurement validity.

MEASUREMENT RELIABILITY

Measurement reliability speaks to consistency: How can you establish that your observations would be repeated if your methods were replicated, or repeated, with the same participants in the same context? To quantitatively oriented researchers, it seems reasonable that each time you apply a given instrument or measure to the same thing, the observation should result in the same findings. If you stand on a scale to be weighed, you should get the same reading each time (assuming that you haven't gained or lost any weight in between the readings!). The same applies to the measurement of variables—you want your measure to be consistent.

MEASUREMENT VALIDITY

Measurement validity addresses whether or not you measure what you say you are measuring. Let's suppose you claim to have a measure of "TV appreciation," the extent to which someone appreciates and values TV viewing. The way you measure this is to simply count up the number of hours the person spends in front of a TV in a typical day. You argue that if someone is appreciative of TV, he or she will spend a lot of time viewing it. But have you really measured TV appreciation or something else instead—say, boredom or loneliness? When people are bored, they might watch a lot of TV, not because they ap-

preciate or value it but because there's nothing better to do. And lonely people might watch a lot of TV because they don't have many friends to join them in alternative leisure pursuits. In short, hours spent in watching TV may measure a person's opportunity for alternative pursuits, not appreciation of TV. Measurement validity speaks to whether researchers measure the variables they claim to be studying.

Beginning researchers often confuse measurement reliability and validity. It's easy to confuse the two, because they are integrally related to each other. Measurement reliability is a necessary precondition of validity: To be valid, a measure must be reliable. But reliability alone is insufficient evidence to give us confidence of validity. Any two people could probably use a stopwatch to assess the time someone spends watching TV—our two observers would be reliable with each other. But, as we just discussed, the fact that they reliably measured TV watching doesn't mean that they were measuring what was claimed—TV appreciation.

We'll have much more to say about measurement reliability and validity in Chapter 6, which deals with the specification of what it is you want to study—a process called *conceptualization*. We're going to look at some of the terms we use quite casually in everyday life and see how essential it is to clarify what we really mean by such terms when we do quantitative research. Once we can conceptualize a phenomenon we wish to study, we can then develop a set of procedures to identify the variable and measure its attributes—a process called *operationalization*. Conceptualization and operationalization address measurement reliability and measurement validity in some detail.

EXTERNAL VALIDITY

External validity speaks to a study's generalizability. How can you establish confidence that the findings of a particular study have applicability in other contexts or with people other than those who participated in the study? Positivist and systems researchers are usually interested in advancing generalizable explanations—either causal or functional—that extend beyond the boundaries of the particular study. Positivist researchers are interested in making statements about causal laws that apply whenever and wherever the independent variable and the dependent variable are present. Systems researchers are interested in making statements of functional explanation that apply to all systems that are like those examined in a particular study.

Beginning researchers often confuse internal validity and external validity. The key to keeping them straight lies in the words *internal* and *external*. External validity directs our attention externally, beyond the boundaries of a given study, to ask if the study's findings are applicable outside the study to other contexts and to other people. By contrast, internal validity looks inside a given study to see if its methods and procedures allow confident claims about description and explanation.

Chapter 7, on sampling, addresses the fundamental scientific issue of generalizability, or external validity. As you'll see, we can select a few people or things for observation and then apply what we observe to a much larger group. For example, by surveying 2,000 U.S. citizens about whom they favor for president of the United States, we can accurately predict how tens of millions will vote. In this chapter, we'll examine techniques that increase the generalizability of what we observe.

When quantitatively oriented communication researchers analyze their data, they are usually interested in making claims beyond the immediate sample included in the study. The process of making statistical claims about populations from samples is an issue we examine in our introduction to statistics in Chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11 discusses some basic issues in how to work with quantitative data and how quantitatively to describe a sample with respect to some variable. Chapter 12 introduces you to the logic of inferential statistics and introduces you to basic statistics often found in communication research.

Before we turn to the chapters in this part of the book, two points should be made. First, you'll probably discover that you've been using these scientific methods casually in your daily life for as long as you can remember. You employ a crude form of content analysis every time you judge an author's motivation or orientation from her or his words. You engage in at least casual experiments frequently. The chapters in Part 2 will show you how to improve your use of these methods to avoid the pitfalls of casual, uncontrolled observation.

Second, none of the data-collection methods described in the following chapters are appropriate to all research topics and situations. We've tried to give you some ideas of when a given method might be appropriate. Still, we could never anticipate all the possible research topics that may one day interest you. As a general guideline, you should always use a variety of techniques in the study of any topic. Because each method has its weaknesses, the use of several methods can help fill in any gaps. If the different, independent approaches to the topic all yield the same conclusion, you've achieved a form of replication.