




Ethical Issues in Social Work Research

ScWk 240 – Week 3 Slides

Why Be Ethical?

- * Most unethical behavior results from a lack of awareness, or pressures to take shortcuts in building a career, gaining prestige or holding a job.
- * Ethical social work research takes longer to complete, costs more money, is more complicated, is more difficult to do (compared to other social science research), and is required by NASW, CSWE and other licensing bodies and professional associations.



“Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.”

-- Samuel Johnson

Review of Ethical Issues

- **Voluntary Participation – No Coercion**
- **Informed Consent**
- **No Harm/Distress to Participants**
- **Protect Subject's Privacy & Confidentiality**
- **No Deception**
- **No Scientific Fraud or Misconduct**
- **Avoid Bias and Insensitivity**
- **Obligations to Professional Colleagues**
- **Political and Administrative Meddling**

IRB's – Institutional Research Boards

An **Institutional Review Board (IRB)** is an administrative body established to protect the rights and welfare of human research participants recruited to participate in research activities that are conducted under the auspices of the institution with which it is affiliated. IRBs have the authority for all research activities to:

- Approve or disapprove
- Require modifications in
- Assess violations
- Investigate subject complaints
- Conduct continuing reviews

Some Fundamental Principles:

- * Subjects must consent voluntarily (with sufficient knowledge and comprehension)
- * Research must be for the good of society and the results must be unreproducible by other means
- * Research must be conducted by qualified persons
- * Risk should not exceed benefits
- * Protocols should be independently reviewed
- * Additional protections for certain vulnerable groups

Useful Definitions

- * A human subject is a living individual about whom an investigator (professional or student) conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable private information.
- * Minimal risk – probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater than those encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests

Informed Consent

The basic elements of the consent process include:

- ◆ Full disclosure of the nature of the research and the subject's participation
- ◆ Adequate comprehension on the part of the potential subject, and
- ◆ The subject's voluntary choice to participate
- ◆ Can withdraw at any time

Obtaining Consent

- * Subject must have the legal and mental capacity to give consent
- * Sufficient opportunity is provided to consider
- * The possibility of coercion or undue influence is minimized
- * Language is understandable to the subject population

Reducing the Risk of Harm and Protecting Identity

* **Anonymity**

Subject does not provide identifying information; identity of subjects is not known by anyone

* **Confidentiality**

Subject does provide identifying information; researcher knows identity of subjects but promises not to reveal it.

Forms of Malpractice or Negligence

- * Misfeasance: Commission of a proper act in a wrongful or injurious manner or the improper performance of an act that might have been performed lawfully.
- * Malfeasance: Commission of a wrongful or unlawful act.
- * Nonfeasance: The failure to perform an act that is part of one's responsibility.

IRB Duties in Assessing Risk

IRB Responsibilities:

- * Identify risks
- * Determine that risks are minimized
- * Determine that “risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits”
- * Determine that subjects are adequately informed about “any reasonable foreseeable risks or discomforts.”

NASW Code of Ethics

- * “(b) Social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions. Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice and social work ethics.”
- * “(c) Social workers should base practice on recognized knowledge, including empirically based knowledge, relevant to social work and social work ethics.”
- * **(All of 5.02 Evaluation and Research)**

The Ethics of Reporting Research

- * Full and clear description of study process
- * Full disclosure of flaws of study
- * Report any negative findings as well as any positive findings

Examples for Discussion

1. While parents await their children in the waiting room of a Child Guidance Center, the center's social worker staff instructs them to complete a questionnaire on child-rearing attitudes. The staff will use the findings of this study to prepare a proposal for funding for a parent education program.
2. A community organizer decides to observe and interview people, and write about a demonstration against police brutality that is expected to be a lawful. The demonstration unexpectedly becomes violent, and property is destroyed. Law enforcement officials show up and demand that the organizer identify people observed breaking the law. Rather than risk arrest as an accomplice after the fact, the organizer complies.

Additional Discussion Examples

3. Social workers in a battered women's program conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of the services provided by the program, hoping to bring visibility and resources to the program by publishing the findings. The findings, however, unexpectedly indicate that the services are not effective. In light of these findings the social workers decide they must not have conducted a proper study of the services that they are convinced are effective, and they decided not to let anyone know about the study.
4. Two social work students decide to carry out their class research project by observing the nocturnal activities at a shelter for the homeless. The shelter has a limited number of beds and cannot accommodate everyone seeking housing. The two students show up and wait in line early enough to get beds and then watch and record the goings on at night while they pretend to be asleep.
5. A new intervention is advertised as an extremely effective and powerful grief therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder among victims of sexual assaults. Although sufficient resources exist to provide this treatment to all clients at a rape crisis center, the decision is made to provide it to only half the clients, so its effects can be compared to the effects of the center's routine services.