

# Journal of Empirical Research on Research Ethics

## Editorial Policy

The *Journal of Empirical Research on Research Ethics* (JERHRE) will be a quarterly, international, online, peer reviewed journal dedicated to empirical research on the ethics of human research, and reviews of selected areas of research on research ethics with a focus on creating an up-to-date summary of knowledge in that area, best research practices, and an agenda of needed future research. JERHRE will be a nonprofit corporation whose excess income will fund educational outreach programs.

**Purpose:** JERHRE will fulfill an urgent need for empirical data that will replace conjecture and anecdote as guides to decision making by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and investigators as they seek to solve problems of conducting human research ethically. This is in keeping with the recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences in their 2003 report *Protecting Participants and Facilitating Social and Behavioral Sciences Research* (Citro, Ilgen & Marrett, 2003). Ethics is a normative field that seeks to determine the morally best action, but it does not tell *how* to carry out the kind of action that normative ethics identifies. For example, one should respect human subjects; but, operationally, what does it mean to respect persons in a given context. That is an empirical question.

**Best Practices & Evidence-based Ethical Problem Solving:** JERHRE's goal is to provide a body of empirical research that will be used by IRBs, investigators and teachers of research methodology to enrich the understanding of best ways to achieve valid research and fulfill ethical mandates. It will also be useful to those who teach in the area of research ethics and regulation, and to regulatory and funding agencies in fine-tuning their standards and recommendations.

All research published on JERHRE should have as one of its major goals to help define best practices. In some cases the focus of publications might be quite narrow, e.g., What research participants in Mali, Africa understand about their contribution of blood samples to research on the incidence of HIV infection and an agenda for research on how to improve comprehension of the purpose of such research in traditional cultures such as Mali. In other cases, the focus of research will be broader, such as the diverse ways in which IRBs handle student research with an evaluation of the pros and cons of each approach. In every case, however, a concluding part of the research or review article should focus on implications for best practices, and should outline the kinds of future research that will further illuminate that topic.

All manuscripts will be peer reviewed, copy-edited as needed, listed on line (including author's name, title, and abstract), then incorporated into the next issue as PDF files; thus there is no publication delay. Manuscripts must conform to APA manuscript style and be submitted in electronic form.

A wide range of research methods are acceptable, ranging from simple surveys, interviews and focus groups to complex studies of organizations, methodologies, or cross-

cultural comparisons, and rigorously designed experiments varying conditions systematically (e.g., varying amount of compensation offered to participants and its effect on volunteering, candor and satisfaction with the research experience). All research submitted to JERHRE must be data-driven. Its context (e.g., the demographics of the populations studied; the research methods, the way participants were recruited and the project explained to them, the comparability of sites in multi-site studies) must be explained so that valid conclusions may be drawn about the generalizability of the findings. The author(s) must state what they regard as the usefulness of the reported research for others who are planning and conducting research on human subjects, as well as the limitations to the generalizability of their findings, and conclude with an agenda for future research on the given topic, and discussion of how the research might contribute to education and training of students, researchers, or IRB members.

Commentaries and philosophical analyses are outside the scope of JERHRE. Below is a description of 21 kinds of empirical research that would be of interest to JERHRE.

**Special interactive features for readers and authors:** There will be a monitored online forum for reader reactions to papers, reader evaluation of their usefulness, discussions between readers and authors, and suggested agendas for future research on the given topic. Readers may use the online resources to search for archived articles and bibliographic references, examine the number of times given articles are accessed by readers, and observe reader evaluation of the usefulness of articles. Readers are invited to use JERHRE in order to initiate a collaboratory with others who would like to participate in collaborative research by gathering comparative data in various locations. Authors should bear in mind that they are likely to receive useful reactions from readers and may find future collaborators in this venue as well as good ideas for further research.

**Conducting empirical research on research ethics:** Empirical research on research ethics is not a field in which scientists typically work. How does such research get started? What motivates it? Several motivators have become apparent, and more are likely to emerge.

- Ethical problems may need to be solved empirically in order to ensure participant cooperation.
- New research problems sometimes pose a complex of methodological and ethical puzzles and produce whole new outlooks on research, e.g., AIDS research helped define what was and was not effective with regard to community consultation and community-based research.
- One may work in a substantive area of social science that is relevant to research ethics, such as socialization of scientists, privacy as a behavioral phenomenon, or organizational behavior.
- Methodologists may create methodological solutions to ethical problems.
- One may find oneself embroiled in ethical problems, e.g., accused of insensitivity to or betrayal of a research population and examine issues causing this turmoil.
- Researchers puzzled by certain ethical problems over the years may find that research and scholarship about those problems become the next logical step in their career.

Given such motives, how does one then begin the empirical research? There are several ways currently found in the literature. More are likely to emerge:

1. Stand-alone experiments, surveys, observational studies, methodological analyses, etc. may be conducted on any of the 21 topics listed in the table below.

2. Pilot studies may be built into a larger study to answer an ethical question.
3. Post-study evaluation, perhaps as part of debriefing or through follow-up contact with participants, can be used to answer questions about participants perceptions, concerns or reactions.
4. Surrogate subject studies may be conducted, asking people how they would feel about being in a study in which such and such would occur.
5. Experiments within studies, e.g., a survey may randomly assign respondents to different approaches.

Each of these approaches may focus on a specific procedure or population to discover the best way to conduct a specific kind of research in a specific context. Alternatively, one may employ such approaches to compare findings across differing populations, contexts, and types of research, in pursuit of answers to more general ethical questions. Or, one may perform a secondary analysis of studies of an ethical issue over diverse topics, procedures or populations (e.g., by meta-analysis) to seek general principles of ethical problem solving.

Not all research on research ethics is empirical in the strictest sense. *Methodological* research can provide a basis for solving ethical dilemmas. *Modeling* can direct more efficient empirical answers to questions. *Theoretical* research typically involves methodological or empirical study as well, but is primarily focused on conceptualizing and synthesizing what is already known about a given problem. The following are some kinds of ethical issues that might be investigated, and would be appropriate topics for inclusion in JERRE.

JERHRE is tentatively scheduled to begin publishing in 2006. If you are interested in learning more, being a reviewer on JERHRE's editorial board, contributing articles, or know of people who might be interested in contributing articles, please contact [Jsieber@csuhayward.edu](mailto:Jsieber@csuhayward.edu) or phone her at 510 538 5424.

Group	Topic
Communication with Subjects & Community	<b>Communication</b> processes between researcher and participant, organization, community or other entity. Informed consent, modes of communication, comprehension, trust, decision making, competence of subjects, context, etc.
	<b>Deception</b> , intended, unintended, self-deception, perceived, concealment, mental reservations, omissions; evaluation of; desensitizing and debriefing; consent to be deceived, waive informing until later, efficacy of alternatives.
	<b>Cultural sensitivity</b> , norms, language, meaning equivalency, cognitive interviewing, community consultation, partnership, advance planning, etc.
	<b>Relationships</b> as a source of qualitative data, nature of relationship.
Acquisition and Use of Data	<b>Privacy</b> relative to stage of human development, learning, culture. How IRB and scientists' views on what is private may differ from that of subjects.
	<b>Confidentiality</b> and relationship to what subjects will divulge, how researchers can keep confidentiality promises; methods of preventing breach.
	<b>Dissemination &amp; data sharing</b> , modes of dissemination; risks, responsible use, emphasis, omission, misinformation, data suppression or censorship, role of mass media; obligation to contribute to scientific literacy of society.
Outside Influence on Research	<b>Government regulations</b> , interpretation, creative application, effects on research, how empirical evidence can influence the regulatory process.
	<b>IRBs</b> , how they function and may be improved, their effects on research.
	<b>Perception</b> . How IRBs, investigators, and regulators' perceptions of one another influence ethical and regulatory activity.
	<b>Taboo &amp; controversial research</b> that may cause harm or misleading results; whether research should be censored or results suppressed.
	<b>Scientific integrity</b> , kinds of misconduct, causes, prevention; including faulty research design and statistics.
Risk & Benefit	<b>Risk, wrong &amp; harm</b> , how evaluated, perceived by researchers, IRBs and subjects; how is safety judged; how can procedures be made safe?
	<b>Benefit &amp; promise</b> of research, how they may arise, be estimated and maximized for subjects, communities, institutions, science and society.
	<b>Risk/benefit</b> , when knowledge may be gained at some risk; how justified?
Theory, Method & Design	<b>Epistemology</b> – Is knowledge a form of intrinsic good or of power? Is it “out there” or a construction of the interaction between researcher and participant? What are the relative merits of various approaches to knowledge?
	<b>Validity</b> , balancing rigorous design with satisfaction of other ethical concerns. Making valid designs more efficient to answer a wider variety of research questions; concepts of measurement and comparability over time.
	<b>Modeling</b> . Theories/methods of modeling to improve accuracy and sophistication of prediction and empirical tests of complex ideas about health.
	<b>Equitable treatment of subjects</b> , distributive and procedural justice in research planning, conduct and application (e.g., use of placebos; withholding sponsorship information from subjects; selection of subjects); stratification, demographic challenges (e.g., mixed ethnic persons).
	<b>Technology, efficiency &amp; sampling</b> , uses of new technologies to reach or observe subjects, combinations of technologies, assumptions underlying such new designs.
	<b>Language and meaning</b> . How can differences in language and meaning within and between cultures be bridged, yielding ethical procedures, and valid and comparable results?