# Ethics of Empirical Research

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**Abstract**: Media psychologists need to reflect on what is considered ethical research in an increasingly complex digital media and sociocultural landscape by asking questions about whose interests are served through research and the purposes that research is used for. Ethical values such as truth, equity, justice, and inclusion should govern all aspects of research topics, questions, methods, participants, instrumentation, data collection, analysis, and distribution. Ethical principles are influenced by procedural ethics, professional codes, and personal aspirational ethics. Ethical considerations for media psychologists range through informed consent, minimizing psychological harm, increasing social responsibility of researchers, greater benefit to communities that are researched, privacy and confidentiality, and authorship and citational practices. Ethical considerations relating to experimental research, computational analytics, Internet-based data, social media data, and biophysiological data are discussed in this entry.

**Keywords**: confidentiality; consent; ethics; research; social justice; values

## Significance of research ethics

Empirical ethical frameworks largely stem from biomedical and physical scientific research, which assumes that objectivity and having a "neutral" stance as a researcher are important. However, as social scientists conducting research within media psychology, scientific values such as objectivity, rationality, and neutrality need to be balanced with other social values such as nonviolence, empathy, honesty, and care in all aspects of the research process.

While some ethical decisions for media psychologists might be fairly straightforward and obvious, others could be more complex and challenging. Ethical decisions could range from what topics to consider studying, which participants to recruit, what methods to use, which instruments to consider, how to collect the data, how to analyze the data, and how to share the findings. Avoiding physical and psychological harm might be an easy decision to make. However, for other ethical decisions, such as the use of deception in experimental methods, the ethics of collecting online or biophysiological data, or designing questionnaires to be inclusive and accessible, there might be a need to consider multiple perspectives and evaluate the decisions throughout the research process.

There are many reasons why media psychologists need to be attentive to ethical issues. Some factors include the important need to protect research participants from harm, build integrity within the research processes, comply with professional codes of conduct, and to respond to evolving ethical research situations (such as digital technologies, new methodological innovations, changing sociocultural contexts, etc.) (Israel, 2015).

## Ethics and social science research

The history of social science research is fraught with many examples of ethical violations. For example, the abuses and exploitation of research participants by Nazi scientists

led to the development of the Nuremberg Code in 1949. This code emphasizes the need for voluntary participation by all research participants such that no individuals are coerced to participate in research without their consent.

Another famous abuse, in the United States, is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which led to the establishment of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and the Belmont Report (Department of Health, Education & Welfare, 1979). The Public Health Service Department conducted research among African American men regarding syphilis without their knowledge or consent. Research objectivity and the scientific method were centered in a way that led to detachment between researcher and participants, which facilitated dehumanization and dissociation from the harm caused to participants over many years (Solomon, 1985). As a result, the Belmont Report helped prioritize the rights of human participants where they could be considered as human beings first, beyond just research participants. This was also when institutional review boards (IRBs) were established in the United States, and all researchers are now required to complete ethics training every few years in order to get their research studies approved by IRBs.

The Belmont Report focused on three main principles: respect, justice, and beneficence. It established clearly that research participation should always be voluntary and should not involve any type of coercion. It also ensured that participants could stop or withdraw from the study without having to provide any explanation or have any negative repercussions for doing so. An important aspect of the Belmont Report is the need to obtain informed consent from participants in order to protect them. When involving children below the age of 18 years and others who are not able to give informed consent, a related process called assent is required. With children, for instance, a parent or legal guardian must consent to their participation in the research study. In a required additional step, the children themselves must also agree (or "assent") to participate in the research. A related concept is process consent, which means that consent is not a one-time approval but an ongoing process throughout the research project. For instance, process consent is something to consider for longitudinal studies that involve multiple steps over a period of time that participants have to complete. Researchers can request a waiver of informed consent when documentation of consent is not convenient, not possible, or could cause harm to the participants. Typically, when such a waiver from written consent is requested, researchers could request verbal consent or other implicit forms of consent, such as clicking the link of an online survey instead of signing a physical consent form.

## Types of research ethics

There are many types of ethical orientations and philosophies that researchers can draw from in making decisions in their professional lives. Descriptive ethics involve describing ethical values. Normative ethics emphasize what *ought* to be done. Applied or situational ethics use case studies and exemplars to illustrate and resolve specific moral issues and ethical dilemmas.

Within research contexts, procedural ethics refers to the notion that ethics is a hurdle to be crossed and bureaucratic paperwork to be completed by researchers (Guillemin & Gilliam, 2004). Such forms of procedural ethics tend to be legalistic and documentation oriented, focusing on compliance with minimalistic codes of ethics. In contrast, Lahman (2018) describes aspirational ethics as that which emphasizes researchers' personal code of ethics and aspirational standards. Aspirational ethics says that researchers should aim for the highest ethical standards rather than merely trying to fulfill the minimal ethical requirements of IRBs or other professional organizations.

Closely related to aspirational ethics is the notion of relational ethics, which draws from feminist ethical approaches of care. This approach focuses on maintaining nurturing relationships, emotional responses, and the importance of context. It places emphasis on values such as inclusivity, nonviolence, human dignity, and social transformation in the research process. Researchers acknowledge the dynamic nature of shared meanings, values, and beliefs of research participants within a culture-centered approach that validates, affirms, and accommodates the perspectives of their research participants. Relational ethics places emphasis on reflexivity and critical self-awareness. It asks researchers to examine their cultural values, socioeconomic status, belief systems, implicit biases, and worldviews in terms of how they might impact the research process.

**Legal regulations, professional codes of ethics, and personal ethical principles**
Empirical researchers are guided by several considerations, such as legal regulations that guide researchers' work within their institutions, professional codes of ethics of associations they might be a part of, and their personal values. Legal regulations are policies and laws that govern the research process within a particular institution, state, or nation. For example, media psychologists working on issues relating to cyberbullying in some states of the United States might not have any legal obligation to report or protect victims, while, in places such as Canada or the United Kingdom, cyberbullying is treated as a criminal offense that one could go to jail for. Similarly, the IRB regulations within higher education institutions in countries or states could differ. These differences shape ethical decisions and considerations.

A second factor that influences research ethics is professional ethical codes. These are ethical guidelines and policies set by professional organizations for their members. Within media psychology as a subfield, professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), the International Communication Association (ICA), and the National Communication Association (NCA) are likely to play a role in shaping a research culture of ethical practices. These professional codes of ethics or best practices of research conduct touch upon issues such as how to protect research participants from harm, how to collect and analyze data in ethical ways, how to accurately and objectively share research findings, how to determine authorship in publications, how to resolve conflicts of interest, and how to be fair and inclusive in journal reviews, award recognition, and so on. Conference panels, public discussion boards, and trade or professional magazines also play a role in shaping expectations of best practices for conducting ethical research within media psychology. Recently, the #CommunicationSoWhite movement within the discipline has brought to light such ethical considerations as inclusion and social justice in terms of citational practices and discussions on how excellence is defined and recognized within professional communication organizations (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018).

Finally, research ethics are also influenced by the researcher's personal values. Personal or aspirational ethics are the researcher's own moral compass that guides research practices. These practices of individual researchers may or may not overlap with legal procedures and professional codes of conduct. Being an ethical media psychologist means approaching empirical research with an ethics of care, self-reflexivity, and sociocultural responsiveness beyond just completing minimally required bureaucratic paperwork. For instance, a researcher might personally value inclusion and social justice even if it is not required by their university's IRB or their professional association's guidelines, and therefore they might actively take into consideration cultural context, participants' worldviews, and value systems in designing and

implementing empirical research studies. Utilizing inclusive research samples and using culturally inclusive language are two ways in which a diversity of perspectives and voices are incorporated into the research process to ensure sensitivity to cultural contexts.

**Ethical considerations for media psychologists**

Although not the only type of empirical research within media psychology, experimental research tends to be the dominant methodology within the subfield. Some ethical considerations that are especially relevant within experimental research relate to risks and adverse outcomes for those in treatment groups, equitable distribution of benefits to all participants, and deception. For instance, research on the effects of media violence needs to consider the harmful effects of exposure to such content on the participants in the treatment group. Researchers need to carefully consider any psychological harm that could occur from exposure to experimental stimuli relating to topics such as mental health issues, suicide, domestic violence, or sexual violence which could serve as triggers for participants. Proper debriefing procedures should be in place, including resources provided to participants to encourage them to seek help to reduce the negative outcomes of participation. As a corollary, if some experimental conditions involve support or access to resources, the researchers should be sure to make those resources available to all treatment groups in the study. Researchers should keep time, transportation, and space accessibility in mind for laboratory-based experiments. They could consider offering compensation for travel, offer a meal, make the spaces more accessible, and offer multiple time-slots to participants. Finally, experimentalists should try to avoid using deception in their work as much as possible. It is considered unethical to fail to inform participants of any deception involved in the study, at least during the debriefing procedure, especially if the aforementioned deception involves making participants uncomfortable, embarrassed, or results in otherwise negative effects. Debriefing procedures allow researchers to keep track of such negative outcomes and reduce them as much as possible by checking in with participants, answering all their questions, and providing them with additional support services and resources when possible.

For media psychologists working with online mediated contexts, there are also important ethical considerations in terms of how to define media, research, and users. While analyzing social networking sites, researchers should consider how to define media content and research participants, whether they are considered public data, or if consent is needed. For example, Twitter data are often considered "public data," but researchers should recognize that many tweets might include personal and proprietary information such as geographic location, family details, or health information. Researchers have to balance their research goals with participants' rights to privacy, to withhold personal information, and to erase or edit information.

Other related ethical issues with online data involve how to cite unfinished online works in progress, manage privacy breaches, and follow guidelines created on how to support researchers who are personally trolled through politically motivated attacks on social media. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) tackled some of these issues by providing a comprehensive policy report on ethical decision making while conducting Internet research. It addressed topics such as authorship, who can be designated as a research participant, how to obtain informed consent in online contexts, and risks and benefits of conducting Internet research across multiple cultural and national contexts.

Another emerging trend within media psychology is computational analytics or big data analyses of Internet-based data and social media platforms. With such quantitative empirical

research, an ethical decision to consider is how to collect and store large amounts of data in ethical ways. As Dove and colleagues (2016) point out, there are unclear ethical guidelines on best practices while working with large data-intensive projects across multiple institutions, especially across various countries. Researchers need to pay attention to where that data are stored, who has access to the data, and what types of security measures are in place to assure confidentiality and privacy for research participants whose data are being collected and stored. It is important for researchers to consult with their IRBs and other local governing bodies and professional organizations to discuss how to avoid personal data breaches by safely monitoring, storing, and reporting about data.

Another trend in empirical research in media psychology is the collection of biometric and material data such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), heart rate, DNA, and telemedicine, as well as using mobile apps to track users' health data. Better guidelines are needed for avoiding unintended harm to participants through violations of privacy and confidentiality when such data are collected and analyzed. The subfield of bioethics becomes relevant for consideration here as we move toward greater use of biophysiological data within media psychology.

<XREF>SEE ALSO: IEMP0016; IEMP0005; IEMP0006; IEMP0008; IEMP0009; IEMP0013; IEMP0015; IEMP0016; IEMP0021; IEMP0033; IEMP0034; IEMP0035; IEMP0040; IEMP0045; IEMP0053

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