

Overview of Research Ethics Module Transcript

What is research ethics?

We will start off by answering “what is research ethics?”, research ethics is the study of appropriate ethical standards for research involving humans, and also establishing appropriate mechanisms to govern such research. Specifically, it is interested in the analysis of ethical issues that are raised when *people* are involved as participants in research. There are three objectives in research ethics; the first and broadest objective is to protect human participants, the second objective is to ensure that research is conducted in a way that serves the interests of individuals, groups, and/or society as a whole, and finally, the third objective is to examine specific research activities and projects for their ethical soundness. This involves looking at issues such as the management of risk, protection of confidentiality, and the process of informed consent.

For further reading you can check out the "What is Research Ethics?" link provided in the "Linked Resources" tab where this module is located.¹

Why do we have research ethics?

It was not that long ago that we did not have specific principles in place to protect participants in research, and many individuals suffered as a result. These are just a few examples of research studies that were conducted in inhumane ways before strict ethical protocols were put into place, to give a sense as to why it is necessary to have them.

During World War II the United States government conducted mustard gas experiments on 60, 000 American soldiers. During this time scientists investigated how so-called racial differences affected the impact of mustard gas exposure on the bodies of soldiers. These “tests” included applying mustard gas to bare skin, spraying soldiers with mustard gas from low flying planes, and the third type of test, the “man-break” test, men were placed in gas chambers and released mustard gas to determine how long it took before men were incapacitated. In these experiments, African American, Puerto Rican, and Japanese men were tested with the purpose of saving white American lives; if African American or Puerto Rican men proved to be less susceptible to mustard gas they could be used on the front lines instead of white troops, and Japanese American soldiers were tested on to learn how to defeat Japan. Soldiers of course experienced both short term and long-term consequences to their health, including psychological disorders, cancer, damage to lungs and eyes, etc., and veterans who participated in the horrific experiments insisted they had been given no warning of the level of suffering they would endure as a result of their participation.²

Another example is the series of unprecedented nutritional studies that were conducted in residential schools and Aboriginal communities between 1942 and 1952 by some of Canada's leading nutrition experts, in cooperation with various federal departments. During the war and early postwar period scientists knew very little about the effectiveness of vitamin and mineral supplements on malnourished populations, therefore their experiments seemed to be driven by a desire to test their theories, rather than help the populations affected, and they came to view Aboriginal bodies as "experimental materials", and residential schools and Aboriginal communities as kinds of "laboratories" that they could use to pursue political and professional interests. Students in these studies were subjected to inhumane treatment including being fed diets that were known to be nutritionally inadequate, being denied dental services, and enduring regular physical examinations that were confusing, painful, and traumatic. Neither the parents nor the children themselves were given an opportunity to provide their informed consent, which scientists justified by saying they wouldn't understand even if they did explain it to them. In the end, these studies did little to alter the structural conditions that led to malnutrition and hunger in the first place and, as a result, did more to bolster the careers of the researchers than to improve the health of those identified as being malnourished.³

Another example of inhumane research occurred in 1971, the Stanford prison experiment was conducted in attempt to find out if brutality reported among guards in American prisons was a result of the personalities of the guards or had to do with the prison environment. Male participants were randomly assigned to be either prison guards or prisoners in a mock prison created within Stanford University. Rather than seek to protect all participants in his research, the experimenter gave instructions to the guards regarding how to behave, telling them to harass, humiliate and intimidate prisoners in order to dehumanize them, and create a sense of powerlessness. In addition to this, "prisoners" were subjected to having their sleep repeatedly disturbed, provided with inadequate food, denied access to shower and restricted access to toilets, and records show the experimenter had planned not to release the "prisoners" any time they pleased, instead only allowing them to be released for health reasons deemed adequate by the medical advisors in the research project. This resulted in psychological distress and anxiety to participants, and afterwards both prisoners and guards reported they felt they were compelled to stay in the experiment and do what was expected of them despite their wishes to leave. In this experiment, the participants playing the role of prisoners were not protected from psychological harm, instead were subjected to incidents of humiliation and distress, and provides another example of researchers putting the desire for knowledge before the protection of human beings, further emphasizing the need to have these policies to protect participants.⁴

These examples combined with countless other examples of inhumane research that has occurred in the past demonstrates the necessity to have strict policies in place to protect human participants, to ensure no others have to suffer for the purposes of research.

Conducting Ethical Research

Now that we've discussed some examples of what unethical research is, we'll talk a little about what ethical research looks like.

What research is deemed ethical? For research that involves human participants to be deemed ethically acceptable by a research ethics board it needs to adhere to the principles outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans⁵. This Policy is informed by leading international ethics norms and aims to promote the ethical conduct of research involving humans in Canada and guide Canadian researchers. A more in depth look at the Tri-Council Policy Statement is provided in the "Tri-Council Policy Statement Principles" module. (Note that there may be other guidelines and principles that may need to be adhered to outside of the TCPS, depending on the context of your specific research. For example, additional policies and guidelines have been created for research that involves Indigenous communities – See the "Research Involving Indigenous Peoples and Communities" module located on OWL.

Who requires ethics approval? All research involving humans conducted by faculty, staff or students at Huron, Western or its affiliated hospitals or research institutes must be approved by a University-sanctioned review board. Ethics approval is required for research involving human participants regardless of the discipline or field of study, and it applies regardless of the scope or scale of the research.

When do you need ethics approval? In many cases of student research receiving ethics approval from a research ethics board is required before the research commences, therefore before participants are recruited, formal data collection begins or receiving access to data, however this may not be the case in some qualitative research projects or research with Indigenous communities (can include where to find the research with Indigenous communities module here).

In the remaining modules we will look more in-depth at the principles and guidelines outlined by the Tri-Council Policy Statement for ethical research involving humans, as well as what the process of obtaining ethics approval looks like for different types of student research.

References:

¹Walton, N. (2015, February 23). What Is Research Ethics?
<https://researchethics.ca/what-is-research-ethics/>

²Smith, S. L. (2008). Mustard Gas and American Race-Based Human Experimentation in World War II. *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 36(3), 517–521.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-720X.2008.299.x>

³Mosby, I. (2013). Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools, 1942-1952. *Histoire sociale/Social history* 46(1), 145-172. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/512043>

⁴Le Texier, T. (2019). Debunking the stanford prison experiment. *American Psychologist*, 74(7), 823-839. <http://dx.doi.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1037/amp0000401>

⁵Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, December 2018.