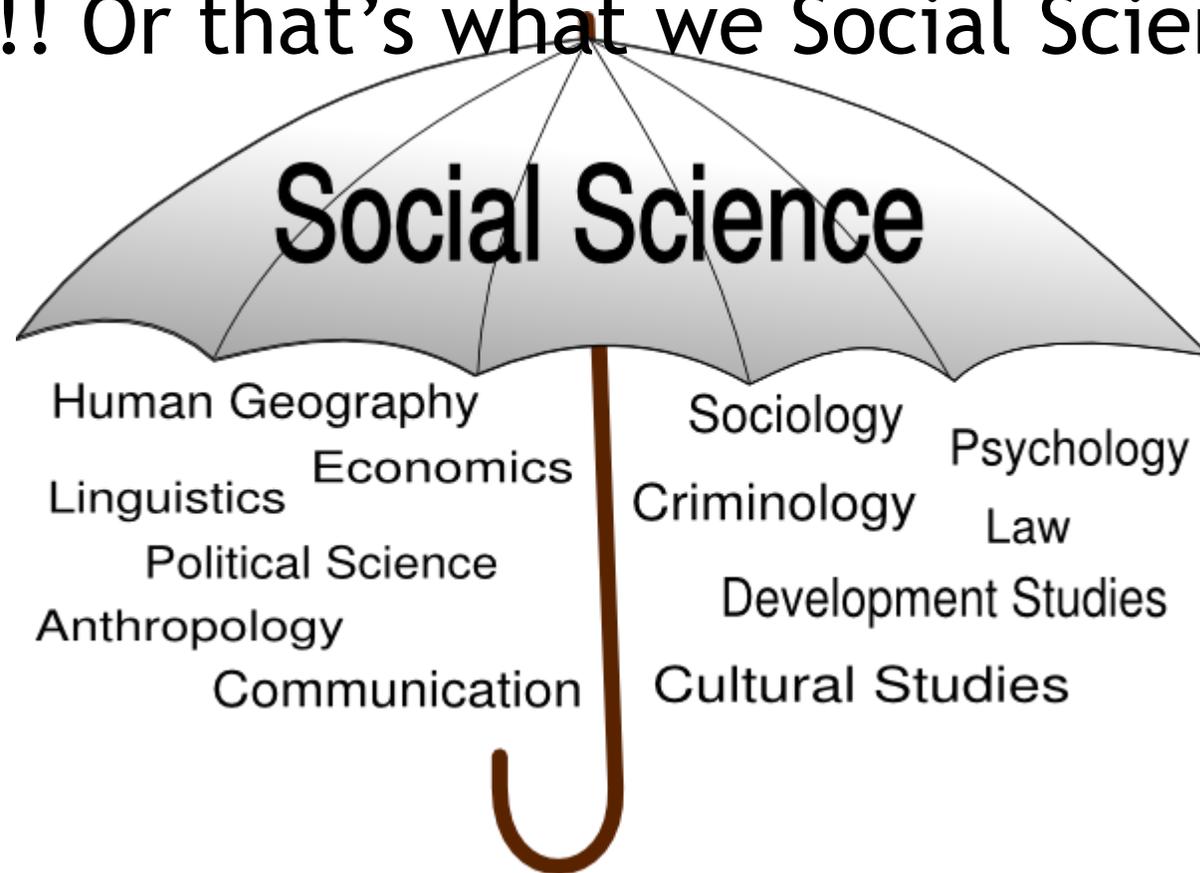


# Ethics in Social Science Research

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All disciplines have at least a bit of social science in them!! Or that's what we Social Scientists like to think.

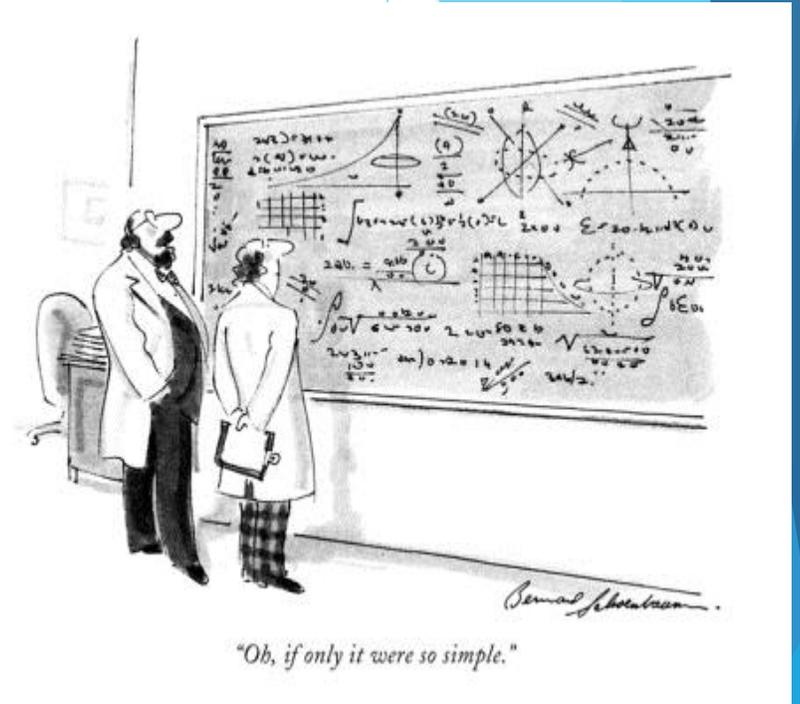


Marketing and Management involve socio-economic dimensions  
Medicine - involves social sciences - health economics, sociology of medicine/health, health/medical geography etc.

On the other hand Social Scientists are keen that you recognize they are scientists .... Even if



**I CAN'T  
KEEP CALM  
I'M A  
SOCIAL  
SCIENTIST**



They get more caught up with their subjects  
They seem to be doing trivial research  
They do not have clear cut causation principles or formulae - they deal with the most complex subjects - human beings.

# Why is ethics in social science research more complex?

Research is being done on the thinking and/or behaviour of human beings. The challenge is how will the participants respond. Human participants, could deliberately provide meaningless or biased responses.



- Researcher is also human - and being a human is consciously/unconsciously subject to biases.
- Researcher's could also influence responses/results during data collection or in the analysis.
- Social sciences involves a wide range of disciplines, that makes laying down common ethical stances more complex
- Social sciences often focus on current crises - causes passionate researchers but also the problem that unethical research could lead to dangerous outcomes
- Diverse research methods are applied - each has its advantages but each has different ethical issues and recognizing these is very important in creating the research design.

# Do we really need ethical reviews for social science research?



*"That's right, Mr. Ferris. For the past fifteen years, you've been the subject of a scientific study. This isn't your real home, I'm not your wife, and THAT is a fake remote control!"*

# Importance of ethics in social science research

- ▶ Often the need for ethics review is questioned in the context of social science research based on two arguments
  - ▶ Unlike in the case of medical sciences it is argued that social science research can 'do no harm' - however this is undervaluing the psychological impacts that could occur, particularly if the topic being handled is sensitive.
  - ▶ 'The freedom and autonomy of the researcher' is considered to be challenged by the demand for ethics clearance. Social Scientists tend to value these rights highly. With such rights however one needs to encourage responsibility.

However the practice of demanding ethics reviews for postgraduate studies in social sciences is now catching on and many social scientists are happy to get the nod of ERCs because it reassures them regarding the ethics status of their studies

# Steps in the Social Science Research process and Ethics

Sometimes (1) **Selecting a research problem** itself can involve research ethics

From: GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH ETHICS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, LAW AND THE HUMANITIES - National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway (2006)

Researchers shall work on the basis of basic respect for human dignity.

While research can help promote the value of human life, it can also threaten it. **Researchers must show respect for human dignity in their choice of topic,**

This implies that the research process must ensure standards:

- ensure freedom and self-determination
- safeguard against harm and unreasonable suffering
- protect privacy and close relationships

## **Ensure freedom and self-determination**

Here one major pitfall is ‘paternalism’ where the researcher limits the scope of responses of the respondents by considering themselves experts on the area being researched.

The opposite extreme is participatory research where the community determines the variables and values. Good but complex in practice.

# Safeguard against harm

Example 1:

You want to study 'Trade Unions'. You go to a company that is functioning smoothly and has no trade union

You ask questions about the importance of setting up trade unions and how trade unions affect workers rights...You ask about workers wages ... and would they consider agitating to get higher wages ....

You get material for your thesis .... The company gets worker unrest!!

Example 2: Collecting information from active criminals—there could be danger to others (retaliation)

## **Safeguard against unreasonable suffering**

Is it fair to keep doing studies on those affected natural disasters or faced by gender based violence - if you can't provide concrete solutions should you make people relive traumatic events?

## **Protect privacy and close relationships**

Yes you are not asking for names but you are surveying a closed group like a group of employees .... And asking them what they think about the management?

You are putting family relationships to the test by discussing intimate topics as part of research? Creating disunity in a community?

## (2) Conceptualization of the research problem

Social science research is multi-dimensional.

One variable has many determinants; one variable has many outcomes and unlike in pure science in social science one cannot “keep the other factors controlled”

Then how the research problem is conceptualized is very important - and for ethical and scientific research this involves dealing with

- many different variables, including drawing on multi-disciplinary sources (economists need to focus on psychology and sociology for example)

- not leaving out any relevant social groups

- and as resources/time and ability to deal with so many dimensions is a problem being extremely explicit about the limitations of ones study - for example why the study focused only on a particular social group.

### (3) Stance/beliefs of the researcher

Unlike in the sciences this is a major issue in the Social Sciences.

Two alternative strategies can be adopted:

- (1) Researcher seeks to be as independent as possible on the issue being studied. Uses external reviewers to assess the study including ERCs to avoid any unintentional bias. Uses trained personnel to collect data who are alert to avoid bias.
- (2) Personal statements - some social science studies begin with the researcher revealing their personal biases so that the reader is aware of any potential effect such biases could be having on the findings. For example  
“ (name) is a feminist, is heterosexual, supports Greenpeace and is vegan”.

# Discipline related dilemmas

**Positive economics** is objective and fact based,

**Positive economic** statements are statements, that can be tested and proved or disproved.

i.e. “Inflation is worse now than ten years ago.”

**Normative economics** is subjective and value based.

**Normative economic** statements are opinion based, so they cannot be proved or disproved.

“Equity”... “consumer choice” ... “taxation should be progressive”

Most research is conducted with normative economics underlying the positive economics research - and this can create biases.

## (4) Consultancies vs independent research

In social sciences much of the research done is consultancies

- at worst - these consultancies come with the conclusion determined first
- at best, one is still limited to taking a narrow perspective of the problem, constrained by time and resources

Independent research however is difficult to undertake on any significant scale given the costs involved in carrying out surveys.

The compromise then is to try to work on different dimensions or geographical distributions using a series of studies, done by different individuals at different times; to go in for lots of group research or to have a life plan of research!

# (5) Alternative Research Methodologies

## 1. Individual or Household Surveys

- (1) Selecting the relevant population
- (2) Sampling



**Sample size** is a major problem in social sciences - often survey instrument tends to be long so number of respondents needs to be small - but this affects representativeness of the sample - an ethical issue on the one hand because of potential bias, and on the other unethical in terms of resources as results are often dismissed for being unscientific.

Voluntary Participation of students/patients?

Being part of a sample could lead to stigma 'CKDu households', 'poor households'

Problems of Informed consent - illiterate populations/poor functional literacy

Social scientists try to compensate by using triangulation

## Triangulating Sources of Data (Denzin, 1978)

- ▶ Use multiple and different sources of data
- ▶ Use multiple and different methods of research
- ▶ Use multiple researchers
- ▶ Use multiple theoretical perspectives

### (3) Questionnaire formulation

- Based on a literature review
- Use of key informants/experts to go through questionnaire
- Use of Delphis to fine tune questionnaire
- 

Questionnaire format: ethics issues are concerned with

- Appropriateness of content
- Wording of questions
- Order of questions
- Length of questionnaire



Why?

Respondent's dignity and feelings must be considered

Different personalities and thresholds of tolerance among respondents

Participants time is important too

Participants safety

Issue of inquiring into illegal matters?

Issue of illegal information being revealed

- Do you reveal the matter to the boss/police?
- If you do not reveal the matter to the boss/police are you an accomplice after the fact?

## 2. Focus Groups

- (1) Choice of representative participants -  
i.e. Holding focus groups for clinic attendees to ask how well the clinic is functioning?
- (2) Hierarchy  
Holding a focus group involving students and teachers or even teachers and the principal
- (3) Content  
How scientifically valid is to have focus groups discussing sensitive issues?
- (4) Ethics of putting participants on the spot which could lead to negative outcomes



## 3. Observation

# Observation

- **Participant Observations** **Objectivity?**
  - Take part in what you're observing
- **Non-Participant Observations**
  - Just observe – no interaction
- **Disclosed (overt) Observations** **Observer effect**
  - Participants aware of observer **Act differently**
- **Undisclosed (covert) Observations** **Ethics!**
  - Participants unaware of observer



## 4. Case studies

Ethical issues:

Focusing on a very limited number of individuals/households

Important to bring out diversity but selection of 'cases' poses a problem - focus could only be on outliers, or could only be those that are supporting a particular viewpoint

Determining the number of case studies is a problem

Determining the depth of interviews is a problem - how much to probe an individual before one is becoming unethical in being insensitive to the feelings of the respondent

How to write up the reported information so as not to reveal the identity of the individual, and yet highlight all the relevant aspects of the case

## (6) Data analysis and presentation

### **Wrong ethics and scientific practice**

Tweaking of models to get desired result - so conclusion is set and data manipulated;

Suppressing contradictory material - survey results being withheld on some aspects of the problem that go contrary to desired outcome

Ignoring cultural differences

