

ACTIVITY 4.1

Research Ethics

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All research involves ethical considerations. Such concerns do not mean that the research is unethical but rather that the researcher must do whatever she or he can to minimize ethical risks. Institutional review boards (IRBs) look over research proposals to safeguard participants and researchers. There are few hard-and-fast rules about what is and is not acceptable. IRBs generally engage in a kind of cost–benefit analysis.

Common ethical concerns include:

1. Informed consent

- People should not be forced to be into research.
- People have the right to withdraw from the research at any time with no penalty.
- There should be informed consent. If deception is involved, there should be a debriefing.
- To consent, people must be told something about the purpose of the research.

2. Anonymity/confidentiality

- The source of the data should be anonymous or kept confidential to protect people’s privacy.

3. Long-term harm

- While it is acceptable to cause people minor discomfort during the research, no lasting physical or psychological harm should result from their participation.



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Instructions

Imagine you have been assigned the task of sitting on an Institutional review board (IRB) and have been asked to consider the following research proposals. Each proposal involves ethical issues. Read each proposal and answer the questions below.

Proposal One

Tyrone wants to study the impact of watching sexually suggestive/explicit television on people's attitudes toward sex. He plans to test ninth graders because he believes they are still young enough to be highly impressionable. He will solicit volunteers to come after school. Half will be assigned to watch one hour of sexually explicit clips from a cable TV show while the other half will view an hour of clips from the same show that deal with nonsexual topics. After watching the TV shows, all participants will fill out a questionnaire about the attitudes toward sex.

Questions:

What additional information might you want to know about the study in order to decide whether or not it should be approved?

What are the benefits that might result from this research? What are the potential harms?

If you were on an IRB reviewing this proposal, what would your recommendation be?

Proposal Two

Priya is interested in whether listening to music while working out makes people exercise harder. She plans to ask college students to come to the gym and run on a treadmill for half an hour either while listening to music or in silence. The dependent measure will be the number of miles run in that time period.



Questions:

What additional information might you want to know about the study in order to decide whether or not it should be approved?

What are the benefits that might result from this research? What are the potential harms?

If you were on an IRB reviewing this proposal, what would your recommendation be?

Proposal Three

Charlotte wants to research the effect of labeling students (gifted vs. struggling) on their achievement in second grade. She proposes that students in an elementary school's second grade be divided into reading groups in which ability levels (as determined by previous test scores) are evenly mixed. One group will be told they are gifted readers, another group will be told that they are struggling readers, and a third group will be told nothing at all. Charlotte theorizes that by the end of the second-grade year, the students in the "gifted" level group will outperform those in the "struggling" group on the same reading test.

Questions:

What additional information might you want to know about the study in order to decide whether or not it should be approved?

What are the benefits that might result from this research? What are the potential harms?

If you were on an IRB reviewing this proposal, what would your recommendation be?

