

Ethics in Sociology

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to some of the major ethical considerations in conducting sociological research. Although sociologists on the whole are striving to contribute useful, meaningful research to the world, they must adhere to a strong code of ethics to prevent harming subjects, as has happened many times in the past. We will also see how practicing ethics in sociology makes us more capable of effectively solving problems. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. ASA Code of Ethics

Like any scientists, sociologists must consider their ethical obligation to avoid harming subjects or groups while conducting their research.

Sociologists conduct studies to shed light on human behaviors. Knowledge is a powerful tool that can be used toward positive change. And while a sociologist's goal is often simply to uncover knowledge rather than to spur action, many people use sociological studies to help improve people's lives. In that sense, conducting a sociological study comes with a tremendous amount of responsibility.

The **American Sociological Association**, or ASA, is the major professional organization of sociologists in North America. The ASA is a great resource for students of sociology as well. In 1970, the ASA adopted its first Code of Ethics—formal guidelines for conducting sociological research—consisting of principles and ethical standards to be used in the discipline. It was developed out of necessity as a result of several (in)famous studies that were found to have harmed human research participants.

The ASA has a long list of ethical standards that its members are held to. Each of these principles and ethical standards has detailed descriptions and parameters in the 2018 ASA Code of Ethics. The standards that relate most to the research process itself include:

- **Confidentiality:** Researchers must ensure that research subjects remain anonymous to anyone outside the study itself, and must protect all potentially identifying information. This allows subjects to share potentially sensitive information without concern about how it may be tracked back to them as individuals.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In a study on people's experiences with psychotherapy, all participants are anonymous and personal information is removed or changed in the published report. When Joe tells a researcher about his experience with his therapist, he knows that in the published report he will be referred to by a pseudonym and there will be no way to tell which therapist he is talking about.

- **Informed consent:** A researcher must ensure that a participant agrees to participate in a study, and that they understand what they are agreeing to. This means the researcher must explain the purpose and methodology clearly and usually have participants sign documents indicating they understand what they are agreeing to. This prevents participants from being taken advantage of or from agreeing to something they didn't understand.

➔ **EXAMPLE** When Joe signed on to participate in the study about psychotherapy, he knew that this meant a researcher would attend his therapy sessions for the next two months and that he would be interviewed about his sessions afterwards. He knew that the researcher would take notes but would not record his sessions, and that his therapist would be interviewed as well. He agreed in writing to all of these research methods and he understood each step of the process.

- **Dissemination:** The results of a research study will be published or otherwise shared publicly.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The research study on psychotherapy had a big impact on Joe's life for a few months, but he was willing to participate anyway because he knew that the results of the study could be very helpful for future patients like himself. He knew that the results were likely to be published in a journal and could be studied by therapists to help them better help their patients. If the results were only for the researcher's own use and wouldn't have been published, it would not have been worthwhile for Joe to participate.



THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think the ASA crafted such a detailed set of ethical principles? What are other types of studies that could put human participants at risk? Would this type of study always be unethical? Why or why not?



Problem Solving: Skill in Action

Consider a sociologist who is studying how teachers may unconsciously treat students differently, possibly based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status. But the sociologist does not adhere to sociological principles in their research. They don't inform study participants of important information and they take actions that put the participants at risk. In addition to these actions being immoral and illegal, they compromise the outcome of the research.

If the research was completed ethically, it could provide useful information to address unconscious bias in our education system. However, since this is not the case, the unethical practices result in findings that are not useful, and therefore cannot address this issue.



TERMS TO KNOW

American Sociological Association

The major professional organization of sociologists in North America. Abbreviated as ASA.

ASA Code of Ethics

Formal guidelines for conducting sociological research.

Confidentiality

The efforts by researchers to maintain anonymity of subjects from outsiders and to protect all potentially identifying information.

Informed Consent

Researchers are required to explain all parts of a research study to potential participants in order to ensure that they understand what they are agreeing to do.

Dissemination

The publication or other public sharing of the outcomes of the research process.

2. Case Study: Humphreys and The Tea Room Trade

Why did the ASA create a Code of Ethics? What kinds of studies were occurring that necessitated a clear code to mandate researchers' responsibilities to their human research participants (sometimes referred to as "subjects")? Read on, and consider the ethical issues that arose in sociologist Laud Humphrey's *The Tea Room Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (1970).

Laud Humphreys, a sociologist, had a suspicion that men were having sex with other men in public places. This was during a time when widespread homophobia in society made it dangerous for men to openly have romantic or sexual relationships with other men—it was even illegal in many places. Many lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people, as well as gender minorities, were forced into secrecy; getting caught in a such a relationship could mean facing social stigmatization, professional consequences, and jail time.

Humphreys thought that some men were using public restrooms as a safe location to meet for sex when they couldn't risk bringing a partner home. To understand this secret behavior, he gained men's trust in a variety of public restrooms, which he called "tea rooms," by serving as a look-out, among other approaches. Humphreys then recorded these men's license plate numbers, utilized a contact at the police department, and tracked them down at their homes a year later under the guise of a social health surveyor. He interviewed the subjects to understand their motivation, what types of work they did, and their marital status. In the course of his interviews, he also discovered that only 14% self-identified as homosexual.

Observing taboo and (in this case) illegal behavior is risky for the researcher but riskier still for the research subjects. During the 1960s, anti-sodomy laws in most states were used to criminalize sexual behavior, including oral sex and anal sex; these laws were discriminatory in intent and effect, as mixed gender couples were almost never prosecuted for engaging in oral or anal sex. Not only was Humphreys observing behavior that was considered taboo by many Americans at the time, but this behavior was also criminally prosecutable.

Researchers must obtain participants' informed consent and must discuss with subjects the responsibilities and risks of research before they agree to partake. During a study, sociologists must ensure the safety of participants and immediately stop work if a subject becomes potentially endangered on any level. Researchers are required to protect the privacy of participants whenever possible. Even if pressured by authorities, such as police or courts, researchers are not ethically allowed to release confidential information.

In this case, Humphreys did not disclose his role as researcher in the tea rooms nor did he let the men in the restrooms know he was doing sociological research on sexual behaviors in public restrooms. He also did not protect the privacy of the unknowing research subjects—he went to their homes and at that time again failed to disclose his true purpose for being there!

Humphreys defended his concealment of his identity and purpose because of the greater scientific knowledge he was able to obtain about this hidden social world. He knew the men's behavior would change if they knew he was a researcher writing about informal sexual encounters in public places. Humphreys also promised that he would follow the ethical standard of confidentiality and would protect the identities of the 100 men he observed and had personal contact information for, even if it meant being arrested himself. Ultimately, it did not come to this.

Although the ASA Code of Ethics was not in place until Humphreys published his book (drafts of the Code were being written around the time he completed his research), his work was still controversial for that era in sociology due to his methodology. Interestingly, there is evidence that shows a decrease in police raids after *Tea Room Trade* was published in 1970. Thus, advancing knowledge about taboo behavior and taboo groups can lead to policy changes.

Humphreys' work was published not long after the Stonewall protests of 1969, which were the result of an overzealous police raid on a gay and lesbian nightclub in New York City. This event helped to initiate the gay rights movement in the United States.

3. Doing Research Under a Code of Ethics

Researchers have long been aware of the tendency of people to act differently when they know they are being watched. In other words, we don't always behave naturally when we know we are being observed. This is called the **Hawthorne effect**—where people change their behavior because they know they are being watched as part of a study. The Hawthorne effect is unavoidable in some research. In most cases, sociologists have to make the purpose of the study known. Subjects must be aware that they are being observed, and a certain amount of artificiality may result.



THINK ABOUT IT

Would you willingly participate in a sociological study that centers around deviant and/or illegal behavior such as underage drinking on college campuses? Why or why not? From a research and policy perspective, why is it important to understand this type of behavior?

How do sociologists do research with this Code of Ethics in place? As it turns out, most people respond well to honesty.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Sociologist Kathleen Blee studied women in the neo-Nazi movement and in other racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, utilizing the same methodology of participant observation and interviews that Humphreys did, but during the implementation of her research project she followed all research protocols and was able to earn the trust and cooperation of her research subjects. Similarly, Philippe Bourgois studied crack dealers in New York City using participant observation and interviews, and was forthright concerning the purpose of his research. Observing ASA principles, he obtained informed consent from all of his research subjects.

These projects take years to execute, but provide invaluable information about human behavior and social groups. They also inform policy on issues such as racism or the drug trade. These studies, and many others, show that sociologists can obtain valuable research about behavior that can be highly secretive while still abiding by the ASA Code of Ethics.



BIG IDEA

Just because being honest with subjects makes it more challenging to do some types of research doesn't

make it okay to lie to subjects. With time and effort, most studies can still be completed successfully while abiding by ethical standards.

Sociologists also value the distribution of knowledge in their field, or dissemination. Researchers must make results available to other sociologists, must make public all sources of financial support, and must not accept funding from any organization that might cause a conflict of interest or seeks to influence the research results for its own purposes. The ASA's ethical considerations shape not only the study but also the publication of results.

➔ **EXAMPLE** If Amazon wants to fund a researcher to study the effects of Amazon Prime on small businesses, sociologists would see a conflict of interest because the corporation would be invested in the results.



TERM TO KNOW

Hawthorne Effect

An unavoidable phenomenon in research where people change their behavior because they know they are being watched as part of a study.

4. Case Study: Stanford Prison Experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment is perhaps one of the most famous sociological experiments ever conducted, as well as one of the most notorious. In 1971, the experimenter Phillip Zimbardo selected 24 male university students—predominantly white and middle class and healthy—to take part in a simulated jail environment to examine the effects of social setting and social roles on individual psychology and behavior.

The subjects were randomly divided into 12 guards and 12 prisoners. The prisoner subjects were arrested at home and transported blindfolded to the simulated prison in the basement of the psychology building on the campus of Stanford University. Within a day of arriving, the prisoners and the guards began to display signs of trauma and sadism, respectively. After some prisoners revolted by blockading themselves in their cells, the guards resorted to using increasingly humiliating and degrading tactics to control the prisoners through psychological manipulation. The experiment had to be abandoned after only six days because the abuse had gotten out of hand.

While the insights into the social dynamics of authoritarianism it generated were fascinating, the Stanford Prison Experiment also serves as an example of the ethical issues that emerge when experimenting on human subjects and the types of emotional harm that subjects can endure as a result of participating in research. This experiment took place only a year after the ASA first published their Code of Ethics, but even where Zimbardo followed the basic ethical rules—the subjects all consented to participation in the study—he still did not develop an ethical study, judging from the impact the experiment had on its subjects physical and mental wellbeing.

Additionally, this classic experiment, which is cited in most sociology and psychology textbooks, has recently been called out as being “theatre” rather than rigorous science. Some social scientists have even provided evidence to show that Zimbardo and his team coached research subjects into being cruel (guards) and dramatic (prisoners). The experiment has also been criticized for its small sample size and unrepresentative sample population.



BRAINSTORM

Zimbardo wanted to study whether the power dynamics of a prison environment made otherwise average people act cruelly and sadistically. What are some ways that this question might be studied without actually putting any experimental subjects through cruel and sadistic treatment?

5. Value Neutrality

Pioneering German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) identified another crucial ethical concern. Weber understood that personal values could distort the framework for disclosing study results. While he accepted that some aspects of research design might be influenced by personal values, he declared it was entirely inappropriate to allow personal values to shape the interpretation of the responses. Sociologists, he stated, must establish **value neutrality**, a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results. Sociologists are obligated to disclose research findings without omitting or distorting significant data. Value neutrality provides higher-quality research, enabling sociologists to effectively address societal issues and use their **problem solving skills**.

Is value neutrality possible? Many sociologists believe it is not feasible to entirely set aside personal values and retain complete objectivity. They caution readers, rather, to understand that sociological studies may, by necessity, contain a certain amount of value bias. It does not discredit the results, but allows readers to view them as one form of truth rather than as a singular fact.

Sociologists attempt to remain uncritical and as objective as possible when studying cultural institutions; however, value neutrality does not mean having no opinions. It means striving to overcome personal biases, particularly subconscious biases, when analyzing data. It means avoiding skewing data in order to match a predetermined outcome that aligns with a particular agenda, such as a political or moral point of view. Investigators are ethically obligated to report results, even when they contradict personal views, predicted outcomes, or widely accepted beliefs.



TERM TO KNOW

Value Neutrality

A practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the history of the **ASA Code of Ethics** and how the work of **Humphreys on the Tea Room Trade** contributed to the establishment of ethics in sociology. You learned about the constraints of **doing research under a code of ethics** and how the **Stanford Prison Experiment** failed to protect its subjects. You were also introduced to the idea of **value neutrality** as an ideal in ethical research. Finally, you discovered how high ethical standards impact problem solving in sociological research.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: THIS TUTORIAL HAS BEEN ADAPTED FROM "INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY" BY LUMEN LEARNING. ACCESS FOR FREE AT [LUMEN LEARNING](#). LICENSE: [CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0](#)



TERMS TO KNOW

ASA Code of Ethics

Formal guidelines for conducting sociological research.

American Sociological Association

The major professional organization of sociologists in North America. Abbreviated as ASA.

Confidentiality

The efforts by researchers to maintain anonymity of subjects from outsiders and to protect all potentially identifying information.

Dissemination

The publication or other public sharing of the outcomes of the research process.

Hawthorne Effect

An unavoidable phenomenon in research where people change their behavior because they know they are being watched as part of a study.

Informed Consent

Researchers are required to explain all parts of a research study to potential participants in order to ensure that they understand what they are agreeing to do.

Value Neutrality

A practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results.