

Chapter 31

Research Ethics

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ABSTRACT

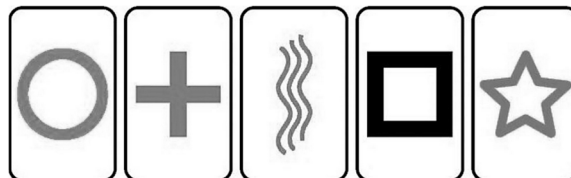
*In this chapter, students are presented with the many ethical dilemmas that can potentially confront social science researchers. Research ethics centers of two fundamental principles: 1) the protection of human subjects and 2) maintaining the integrity of the research process. Both of these principles are discussed in the context of popular culture and past transgressions of researchers, specifically the film *Ghostbusters*, the Tuskegee experiments, and Milgram experiments.*

ETHICS LESSONS AND THE MOVIE *GHOSTBUSTERS*

It is true. A 1984 blockbuster film about three para-psychologists who develop a business to catch ghosts reaffirms two of the most fundamental points of research ethics – (1) the protection of human subjects and (2) maintaining the integrity of the research process. The opening scene of this movie features Dr. Peter Venkman (portrayed by Bill Murray) conducting research with two of his subjects. His project examines the relationship between negative reinforcement and its impact on ESP ability (extra sensory perception). Dr. Venkman is holding up what are called Zener cards, which is a deck of cards that have one of five different symbols on them (see Figure 1). These cards were developed in the 1930s to test ESP ability.

Here is how Dr. Venkman proceeds to collect his data: He holds up a card so that the subject cannot see what symbol is on the back. He then asks the subject to visualize and name the symbol on the back

Figure 1. Zener cards



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of the Zener card. If the subject is correct, nothing happens. Another card is raised and the research subject tries to name the next symbol. If the subject is incorrect, the subject is given a short electric shock. The protection of human subjects is central to research ethics. Simply, you cannot harm your research subjects. The general rule is as follows: the burden of participating in a research study cannot outweigh the potential benefits. In medical research, chronically or terminally ill patients are sometimes exposed to treatments that can be painful or have adverse side effects. However, the potential benefits of these treatments (e.g., increasing one's life expectancy or curing them) outweigh the burden of the treatments themselves.

In addition to harming his research subject, Dr. Venkman undermines the integrity of the research project by (a) voluntarily introducing bias and (b) falsifying results. He voluntarily introduces bias by treating the research subjects very differently. The male research subject is treated with sarcasm and disdain. Dr. Venkman gives you the impression that shocking him is comical. The female research subject is treated warmly. Moreover, she is not shocked at all – not because she has correctly identified all of the symbols, but because she is an attractive coed whom Dr. Venkman has taken a liking. Dr. Venkman, therefore, biases his research by treating the two subjects very differently, and then falsifies his results by telling the female subject that she correctly identified all of the symbols when she has not. Ironically, the male subject did correctly identify one of the symbols yet Dr. Venkman still shocked him.

Another ethical issue is omnipresent in the following exchange:

DR. VENKMAN

“Nervous?”

MALE SUBJECT

“Yes. I don't like this.”

DR. VENKMAN

“Well, just 75 more to go. What's this one?”

All research subjects participate voluntarily. If there is any doubt whatsoever regarding the comfort level, or a research subject's willingness to continue, the researcher has an ethical obligation to remind the subject that their participation is voluntary (the subject must be told this upfront before the start of the study as well). A research subject can drop out whenever he or she wishes.

Following another electric shock, this exchange between Dr. Venkman and the male research subject ensues:

MALE SUBJECT

“Hey! I'm getting a little tired of this.”

DR. VENKMAN

“You volunteered, didn't you? Aren't we paying you for this?”

MALE SUBJECT

“Yeah, but I didn't know you were going to give me electric shocks. What are you trying to prove?”

All research protocols – i.e., what is expected of human subjects, everything they have to do (or are not allowed to do) – must be conveyed beforehand. This is part of a process called informed consent.

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