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# ***Ethical Dilemmas in Social Problems Research: A Theoretical Framework***

**KENNETH D. BAILEY**

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*Interest in ethical issues in social science has increased greatly in recent years. However, no comprehensive framework for the prediction and elimination of ethical dilemmas has been presented in the literature. This paper first analyzes reasons for increased interest in ethical issues, and then presents a broad framework for prediction and analysis of ethical problems. This framework is based on exchange theory, and shows the interdependencies between five "publics" in the research process: sponsors, researchers, subjects, the media, and the general public. The model also utilizes the sociological concepts of role of each public, the configuration of ascribed and achieved status, and norm abeyance. The primary exchange concepts used are cost, benefit, and trust. The model is illustrated with four actual research projects where ethical dilemmas occurred, and is found to be predictive of ethical problems if there are great disparities in cost/benefit ratios between subjects and researchers or sponsors, if there is great discrepancy between the status of the subjects and the researchers or sponsors, and if the researchers engage in norm abeyance.*

Attention to ethics developed during the 1960s, mushroomed during the 1970s, and is continuing in the 1980s. For example the code of ethics for the American Association of Public Opinion Research was first published in 1960, and the code of the American Sociological Association was first published in 1968 (and drastically expanded in 1980). The American Statistical Association has yet to fully ratify its code, although attempts to draft a code have been underway for over 30 years, and an "interim code" was published in 1983. Sustained discussion of ethical issues also dates primarily from the 1960s, and early 1970s, when a substantial portion of the discussion was stimulated by Project Camelot (Gallihier 1973; Horowitz 1965, 1971; Kelman 1967; Sjoberg 1967). For more recent analyses of social ethics see Reynolds (1979), Bolmer (1982), Capron (1982), Beauchamp et al. (1982), Sieber (1982), Hamnett et al. (1984), Bulmer (1979), Nejelski (1976), Friedrich (1983), Cassell and Wax (1980), Wax and Cassell (1981), and Long and Dorn (1982).

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The development of formal codes of ethics is clearly a manifestation of increased concern with ethical issues in social research. How can we explain this increased concern? Were ethical issues wrongfully neglected in the past, or is there an increasing danger of ethical problems, and thus an increasing need for concern with ethics? Doubtlessly we can answer "yes" to both of these questions. Ethical concerns have certainly been neglected in social research, but also, potential ethical pitfalls seem to be increasing, so that there is more need than ever before for systematic concern with ethics. There are at least five reasons why concern with ethics has recently increased.

1. A recent increase, fueled by computerization and other technological advances, in both the number of research studies undertaken, and the size of each study. Such increases have occurred across the board—in terms of the sample size, number of variables, and complexity of design. Thus, more people are affected than ever before, and in a more obtrusive manner.
2. The establishment of computerized data banks of various sorts, giving rise to speculation about the establishment of a national data bank (see Smith 1981, p. 11-13), and raising the specter of "Big Brother" for some people.
3. A transmission of concern with ethics into social research from other fields, primarily medicine. This trend is exacerbated by bureaucratization (e.g., Human Subject Committees, which are bureaucratically mandated to deal with *all* disciplines studying human subjects).
4. A growing concern among some persons (perhaps a social movement) with the rights of privacy of all persons, and with the rights of victims in particular. This trend is evidenced in a number of manifestations. For example, increased concern with animal rights and the ethics of animal experimentation, victim compensation programs, and larger court settlements for victims.
5. Changes in the nature of research subjects. Many social research studies and social problems have traditionally sought to understand and ameliorate various social problems, and often chose the poor and minorities as research subjects (e.g., the study of poverty, crime, drug addiction and delinquency). Thus, there was often a distinct status gap between the upper-middle class researcher and the lower class, relatively powerless research subject.

In such a milieu, it is probable that subjects were not always aware of their rights or were able to seek redress for ethical violations. Recently, subjects have more avenues for redress because of increased emphasis on civil rights, legal assistance programs for the poor, etc. Further, the increase in research studies has broadened the research areas of interest, and thus the subject population.

The nonpoor are increasingly being studied, both because of a saturation of lower class areas by researchers, causing them to turn to unsaturated populations, and because of increased theoretical or substantive interest in areas other than social problems of the poor. Now it is often the highly educated who are saturated by mail surveys and telephone interviews. Survey researchers are increasingly using both of these techniques partly because of technical advances such as

random digit dialing, and partly because they are cost-effective. Both of these methods are viewed as relatively poor data gathering techniques for lower class respondents who may have high illiteracy rates and limited access to telephones. The problem is exacerbated even further when upper class research subjects are studied by "confrontation researchers" who may eschew the semblance of objectivity in favor of a militant stance against status-quo power holders (see Young 1971; Galliher 1973, 1980).

Another reason why ethical issues are particularly salient in social problems research is because of our emphasis on negative factors (identified as problems) in society. Other perspectives can often escape this onus. For example, consider the case of evaluation research. While evaluation researchers are also concerned with problems, they often deal selectively with those where amelioration is probable, eschewing the more intractable cases. Then after program initiation, emphasis is on the positive effects of beneficial gains rather than on problems with negative connotations. For example, the evaluation project may happily reveal that poverty has been lessened considerably, that gains have been made in reading ability of minority students, or that unwanted pregnancies have declined. In comparison, social problems researchers often must deal with the intractable as well as the tractable, and thus must deal with the reactive effects of labeling, for instance, where even mere identification as deviant (for example, as an alcoholic or narcotics addict) may be damaging to the research subject and lead to ethical dilemmas.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate why ethical dilemmas occur in social problems research, and to pursue means for reducing or eliminating them. We will examine the interdependencies that lead to ethical problems, and then present a broad theoretical framework, based on exchange theory, for exploring and dealing with these problems. This framework is more comprehensive than is currently available in the literature, as most of the existing literature deals primarily with issues or studies. Our framework will help us to understand why ethical dilemmas arise in the research process, and will help us to identify areas of potential concern (pressure points). Its emphasis on exchange concepts such as reward and cost will also provide a tie-in for integration with other approaches using the cost/benefit perspective such as evaluation research. We will illustrate this framework with concrete examples from various studies.

### **An Exchange Model of Ethical Research Dilemmas**

It seems axiomatic that social scientists should apply their theories and research findings to their own endeavors. Ironically, this is too seldom done. However, the relatively few attempts to utilize sociological concepts and theory in the analysis of the research process have been quite efficacious (see Gorden 1969; Dillman 1978; Bailey 1987). Dillman's social exchange framework is especially useful. Following Blau (1964), Dillman analyzes the mail questionnaire

and telephone interview studies in terms of exchanges between the researcher and respondent. His central concepts are trust, cost, and reward.

Following Dillman's lead, I propose to build a model of the social research process based on social science concepts. My model is essentially an extension of Dillman's but is somewhat broader, as social problems research is considerably broader than either the mail survey or the telephone interview, and is particularly concerned with field research (see the special issue of *Social Problems*, 1980, on ethical issues in field research). Obviously, full explication of a broad model is beyond the scope of this paper. I will sketch the model in skeletal form here and apply it to social problems research, leaving more extended explication for the future.

### Key Concepts

The research process entails action by at least five groups of human actors (publics). These are: (1) the research subjects, (2) the researchers, (3) the sponsors, (4) the media, and (5) the general public or special audiences such as scholars (subgroups of the general public) to whom the research findings will ultimately be disseminated. Each of the five groups acts within a particular physical environment and social milieu. The five groups are illustrated in Figure 1. I use the term "public" to indicate five groups of actors, each with some common interest or purpose. Each actor within each group has a particular *role*, (e.g., the role of researcher and the role of respondent). In addition, each actor has a set of *statuses*, some of which are ascribed and perhaps not easily changed (e.g., gender, skin color, or age), and some of which are achieved. Of the latter, some may be changed somewhat to facilitate interaction (e.g., dress, grooming, and diction), while others cannot be changed at a given point in time (e.g., education).

The interrelationships among the five groups of actors can be quite complex. Many sequences of interaction are possible, depending upon the particular circumstances that may arise. Some of these may be quite circular and symmetrical, while others are asymmetrical, straight-line sequences. I do not have space here to discuss all of these possible sequences, but will comment upon some of the more basic ones. One basic sequence in research involves the researcher (2) and subject (1). This familiar (2)—(1) dyad is in some sense the generic or nucleus research sequence. Another common interactional mode includes the sponsor

**FIGURE 1**  
Five Groups of Actors (Publics) Involved in the Research Process.

RESEARCH SUBJECTS	RESEARCHERS	SPONSORS	MEDIA	GENERAL PUBLIC
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

Note: Although certain sequences are most common (e.g., 3—2—1), under certain conditions communication may be initiated or received by any of the five groups.

(3), the researcher (2) and the subject (1), with the research either initiated by the sponsor or the researcher. We term the former a (3)—(2)—(1) sequence, and the latter a (2)—(3)—(1) sequence. The only difference is that in the first instance the sponsor approaches the researcher to conduct the research, and in the second instance the researcher approaches the sponsor for funding.

These basic research sequences involving the first three publics in Figure 1 can be broadened to involve the media (4) and the general public (5). Often routine social science cases do not receive the attention of these latter two publics. Cases that do reach these groups may be very positive news stories about a particularly important or topical finding. These will likely take the form of a (3)—(2)—(1)—(4)—(5) sequence. Although there are varieties of these, a routine case is where the research is sponsored (3), the researcher (2) gathers data from research subjects (1), and the media (4) disseminates the findings to the general public (5). The media (4) may receive the findings from any of the first three publics, but most likely from the researcher (2).

Cases where ethical concerns might arise may have a somewhat different sequence. They also are likely to begin with sponsors (3) and proceed to researchers (2). If the ethical concerns are blatant enough, the study may be aborted before it reaches the data-collection stage. If the media (4) and the general public (5) do not become involved, this sequence is an aborted (3)—(2) dyad, and represents a failed study (which of course may be revived later if properly revised). If the media and general public do become involved, this may be either a (3)—(2)—(4) sequence or a (3)—(2)—(4)—(5) sequence. These are also failed studies, and notorious ones as well. While obviously not typical of successful studies (because the study is never completed), these latter sequences may be rather basic sequences for failed studies. The “whistle blower” that causes the study to be aborted will generally be the last public in the sequence (e.g., some member of the local community [5] who becomes concerned) but who also may be some member of the media (4) who somehow becomes aware of the issues involved.

### *Exchange*

The actors and their properties (in the context of the social system), provide the setting for our application of social exchange theory. Following exchange theory as applied by Dillman (1978), we know that three basic variables governing exchange in the course of social interaction are: the *reward* that the actor receives in the exchange; the *cost* incurred during the exchange, and the *trust* felt toward the other actor. Thus, for example, if the researcher uses a mailed questionnaire, the probability that the respondent will return the questionnaire, and subsequently the adequacy of the response rate for the study, depends largely upon the value of the *reward* that the respondent will receive for participating in the exchange, the cost incurred, and the amount of trust placed in the researcher. More specifically, the ratio of reward to cost is the crucial determinant of par-

ticipation in the exchange. Unfortunately, the reward that one receives for returning a questionnaire is generally minimal, and is limited primarily to the satisfaction of satisfactorily performing the role of respondent (having done "one's duty"), and to avoiding any subsequent potential sanctions (such as a follow-up or reminder letter). It is rare that respondents are actually paid. Moreover, costs can be substantial if a respondent does comply. These costs include not only the time and energy spent on the interview or questionnaire, but other costs such as invasion of privacy or mental stress that sometimes beset respondents. Thus, in view of limited potential rewards to respondents, it is crucial that costs be minimized if researchers are to attain a reward/cost ratio that will generate an adequate response rate (Dillman 1978).

### *Application to Ethics*

The full model is highly complex, and its complete explication is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the general research process entails generation of information and its subsequent transmission among the several publics. The degree to which accurate information is generated and transmitted depends upon a number of factors, and these factors are also central to many ethical abuses. These include power differentials between the publics (as manifested both by roles and by statuses such as education and wealth). To analyze the research process, simply apply the reward/cost (benefit/cost) ratio within each public. The public most likely to maximize its benefit/cost ratio is the one with the highest status and the most resources. The potential for ethical abuse is thus greatest where there are major status and power gaps ("social distance") between publics.

The potential for ethical dilemmas also depends to a large extent upon the potential harm of the information gathered, and the processes involved in attaining it. For example, if only a small amount of relatively neutral information is to be gathered, then the respondents likely will not feel harmed, will not have to expend much time and effort on the research project, and will likely open their boundaries to the researcher (e.g., will physically permit the interviewer into the living room). Much social science information is of this nature, thus avoiding ethical problems.

Unfortunately, much of the information desired is harmful. One chief reason for this is that neutral information does not generally ameliorate social ills and is often of little theoretical interest. Thus, much of social research (as well as medical research) deals with negative information concerning social problems. These phenomena (e.g., drug addiction, alcoholism, or delinquency) are seen as problems to be ameliorated. Unfortunately, their study at the very best may entail negative labeling of the respondent (e.g., as an alcoholic), causing him or her possible anxiety or fear of reprisal. At the worst, such studies entail placing the subject in actual danger. Although social research is less likely than medical research to induce harmful physical effects, the harm can be real enough indeed.

For example, information that might seem neutral to the researcher can cause great concern to the respondent if it is income information that the Internal Revenue Service can use to find him or her culpable, or if it is information that serves to reinforce negative stereotypes of minorities, etc.

In such cases of potential harm the respondent can be expected to close his or her system boundaries, and to use all reasonable measures to maintain this closure, thus precluding research. In such cases researchers sometimes resort to deceit by masking the true nature of their research so that it appears neutral. They also capitalize upon the power differences between themselves and respondents, and may practice norm abeyance.

### *Norm Abeyance*

Behaviors which are considered dangerous and thus are regulated closely by societal norms are often condoned under certain conditions. These instances constitute norm abeyance, meaning that the norm proscribing the particular behavior is relaxed (although other relevant norms may remain in force, and additional norms may be so substituted, so that the activity is still monitored and regulated). Familiar examples include: fistfighting, which is proscribed by norms, but allowed (albeit under controlled conditions and under credentialed supervision) in boxing matches; automobile racing, which is similarly normatively proscribed, but allowed on race tracks. Certain research also exhibits such norm abeyance, where a norm proscribing a certain behavior is held in abeyance under two conditions: a controlled setting (e.g., a laboratory with proper facilities and also with proper boundary maintenance), and credentialed supervision (e.g., a researcher with an earned doctorate or other suitable achieved status that is duly credentialed). Such abeyance may be the source of the frequent comment that "Doctors think they are above the law." There is potential for ethical abuse in the course of such abeyance simply because the usual protective norms and sanctions are lacking. This potential may be exacerbated by other factors, such as relatively powerless research subjects, or relatively impermeable boundaries around the research setting that shield it from other publics that might be in a position to sanction a particular activity.

### *The Research Role as Double Bind*

The potential for abuse increases as the power gap or status gap between publics increases (*ceteris paribus*). Thus, pressure points for ethical dilemmas often occur at boundaries between contiguous publics which are unequal in terms of exchange, but where one party has the power to force exchange with the other, even though the benefit/cost ratio is low for the less powerful.

*Researcher/Respondent.* We have mentioned the common example of impoverished respondents (often minority persons), who are relatively powerless. Other relatively powerless groups that often have been research subjects include



prisoners and students. In all of these cases the exchange seems to be relatively one-sided, with the researcher reaping the largest benefit from the interaction. Such cases seem very vulnerable to role abeyance, boundary incursions, deception, and withholding of relevant information. Thus, the cost to the research subject may be high. These costs are generally manifested rather quickly, and may be acute (such as invasion of privacy or mental anguish). Ironically, any benefits that may occur to the subject generally will not be visible for a rather long time. Often these benefits will not be nearly so concrete as the costs, but will be rather abstract benefits such as "contributions to scientific knowledge." Often such contributions will not clearly benefit the subject directly. However, applications of these findings could benefit others in the future.

*Sponsor/Researcher.* The specific nature of the relationship between the researcher and the research subject may be affected by constraints that are placed on the researcher by the sponsor. Thus, the researcher may face the "German Soldier" problem in which he or she must decide whether to comply with the sponsor's wishes. The sponsor/researcher interaction may be symbiotic. For example, the sponsor may need the researcher's expertise, and also needs the researcher's legitimation and role (e.g., status that is credentialed through education), while the researcher needs the sponsor's funds. Nevertheless, there is a clear power gap in the sense that pressure is often asymmetrical (from sponsor to researcher). The researcher often has little access across the sponsor's boundaries (or only very limited and controlled access), and thus generally has very little information concerning the sponsor, and very little real power over the sponsor. Further, the sponsor may adhere to ethical standards (e.g., business ethics or governmental ethics) that differ from the researcher's professional ethics or academic ethics. Sponsors often have little familiarity with research norms and obstacles, and often want unambiguous results that have clear pragmatic utility. They may have little patience with the academic notion that a particular finding is contingent upon other factors.

As respondent powerlessness decreases, either through changes in the nature of subjects (e.g., change from research on impoverished persons to research on elites), or through civil rights movements, or through legal assistance for the poor, etc., the research role increasingly involves a classic "double bind." The researcher is pressed by sponsors and other pressures (e.g., the pressure to obtain publishable findings) to gather information from the subjects, but the subjects sense an unfavorable benefit/cost ratio for themselves, and are able to resist the research. The researcher, with little benefits to give subjects (e.g., even without the legal right to ensure confidentiality if research materials are subpoenaed is caught in the middle. Thus, we should not overlook the fact that the researcher can also become a victim because of extreme cross-pressures with few existing safety valves, and this becomes an ethical issue in its own right.

### **Application to Social Problems Research**

In terms of the broad model outlined above, each of the publics has a certain role to adhere to, and enjoys the rights, privileges, and obligations of certain

statuses as well as achieved and ascribed characteristics. Within this situational complex of role and status, the particular public also has a set of costs and benefits inherent in each particular research project. In terms of the model, we would predict that the research project would proceed smoothly, devoid of ethical complications, if the cost/benefit ratio were positive (benefits clearly outweighed costs) for each link in the chain (each public). However, it is difficult to compare cost/benefit ratios among the various publics as they are relative rather than absolute. That is, a given dollar cost or benefit may be much more relevant for an individual research subject than for a much more powerful and wealthy government research sponsor.

Ethical pressures will mount when the cost/benefit ratio is clearly and egregiously negative for *at least* one public. However, a negative ratio will often lead not to ethical dilemmas, but merely to pressure to terminate the study. Ethical dilemmas will arise *when a negative cost/benefit ratio for one public is juxtaposed with a positive cost/benefit ratio for another public, particularly a more powerful one*. When this combination arises, it is beneficial to the more powerful public (e.g., the researcher or sponsor) for the research to proceed, but it is potentially harmful to the other public (e.g., the research subject). In such a case at least three ethical procedures exist: (1) to terminate the study (to the detriment of the public that would have benefitted); (2) to either increase rewards or decrease costs for the public who stands to be harmed; or (3) to conduct the study as planned but utilize informed consent procedures. The unethical temptation is either to falsely inflate alleged benefits (often difficult to do) or to hide (through deception) or deflate the alleged costs (often easier to do). Pressure points in research projects often lead to the latter problems. Deception is much more prevalent in some research areas than in others (see Kelman 1967).

I will now utilize actual ethical cases to illustrate how the interdependencies diagrammed in Figure 1 can lead to ethical exigencies. Keep in mind during this explication that the exchange concepts of reward and cost are primary, but that other sociological concepts such as norm, role and status are also illustrative. In each case we also can analyze the sequence of publics that were instrumental in the development of the ethical problems.

### **Predicting Ethical Dilemmas**

Using the model (Figure 1) of the interdependencies involved in the exchange relations of social problems research, it is possible now to summarize characteristics which are predictive of ethical dilemmas in social problems research. These are:

1. Negative benefit/cost ratios for research subjects (1)
2. Positive benefit/cost ratios for researchers (2)
3. Positive benefit/cost ratios for research sponsors (3)
4. High status configurations (both ascribed and achieved) for researchers (2)

5. High status configuration (both ascribed and achieved) for sponsors (3)
6. Low status configurations (both ascribed and achieved) for research subjects (1)

When *all* of these contingencies appear simultaneously, the success of the research project is immediately jeopardized, because of potential harm to the respondent (1) (usually the most vulnerable person in the project, although others, particularly researchers (2), can also be harmed). There are a number of potential responses, most of them ethical. These are:

1. To simply terminate the project, at the initiation of the research subjects (1), researchers (2), sponsors (3), or others. It may be possible to reschedule it later when conditions are more favorable.
2. To increase benefits to research subjects, perhaps through better information about the nature of the study and its benefits, or through increased remuneration brought about by increased funding from sponsors, etc.
3. To decrease costs to research subjects, perhaps through improved efforts to guarantee privacy and confidentiality, or changes in study design to lessen potential harm.
4. To advise the research subjects of the potential cost, persuade them to cooperate (perhaps for the public good) while absolving the researchers and sponsors of culpability through signed informed consent.

Nevertheless, if the six contingencies listed above are simultaneously present, and the three legitimate responses are either rejected, or are tried and fail, then there may be a temptation to engage in unethical behavior. This generally takes place through norm abeyance, where researchers or sponsors use their position of status configurations (ascribed and achieved) and relative power to hold norms in abeyance and do things that would generally be proscribed in normal social relationships. These include a variety of efforts to deceive the research subject about the true risk or cost involved in the research. This is most commonly done by deception regarding the nature of the study or its sponsorship.

I noted above that one purpose of this model is to pursue means of reducing or eliminating ethical dilemmas in social research. Although this is easily the topic of a subsequent paper, I might elaborate briefly upon *whose* responsibility it is to identify and rectify ethical problems. Specifically, the questions that we need to ask are: who *can* make predictions (researchers, sponsors, subjects), who *should* make predictions, and *when* should predictions be made? Answering the last question first, the earlier that potential problems are spotted, the greater the probability of rectification. Theoretically, in terms of the model, persons from *any* of the five publics can make the predictions if they have adequate information. Practically speaking, it is unrealistic to assume that the general public (5) and the media (4) can receive a sufficient overall view in most cases to make early predictions. This leaves prediction and rectification primarily to sponsors and researchers in the early stages (and to their overseers, such as ethics or human subjects committees). It is interesting to note that in the famous Camelot case the whistle blower was another social researcher who was not involved in the study.

I already have indicated that one response is to simply terminate potentially unethical projects at the behest of the subjects (1), researchers (2) or sponsors (3), and we might add, at the request of a human subjects committee. Unfortunately, the very pressures which mitigate toward ethical dilemmas (e.g., high benefit/cost ratios for researchers and sponsors) may also mitigate against such groups threatening their own benefits by blowing the whistle on themselves. This suggests that human subjects committees might be the appropriate parties to use our holistic model as a sort of early warning device. Inasmuch as watchdog committees are not directly involved in ethical dilemmas (but only in watching for them) I have not incorporated them in the model, but could do so if space permitted.

### **Actual Cases**

I now will examine actual cases to envision the characteristics of the various publics listed in Figure 1 and the disparities among them. I will first examine three blatant cases of ethical dilemmas and observe the sequences of participation of the various publics. I then will consider a problematic case where ethical issues are more subtle, and some may believe that no ethical considerations have been violated.

#### *Project Camelot*

Perhaps the most famous ethical case in sociological history was Project Camelot (see Horowitz 1965; Sjöberg 1967). In terms of Figure 1 this case represents a basic (3)—(2)—(4) sequence. The issues in this case center around the alleged unethical concealment of the actual purpose of the study and its sponsorship. Originated in the Office of the Chief of Research and Development, United States Department of the Army, Project Camelot's stated purpose was to study the causes of civil violence in Chile. The questions were whether it was merely an objective study, or a means for the army to gain entry to a country, as well as a subterfuge to mask spying activities. In terms of Figure 1, Project Camelot was aborted, as it never reached the stage of interviewing subjects (1).

In terms of cost/benefit, it appears that the benefits would go to the sponsors (the army) (3) if the study were indeed in the interest of counterinsurgency. The costs to the army were to be six million dollars in direct funding. The benefits to the social scientists (2) involved were to be legitimate, objective social-science findings, and these would be the only real objective benefits to the host country (1). The objective costs to the researchers (2) and the host country and subjects (1) would have supposedly been the usual time and effort and invasion of privacy (for the latter), but in actuality were alleged to have been much more—including deceit and the resulting embarrassment and project cancellation for the American sociologists (2) and the potential for counterrevolutionary victimization for the subjects (1) if the research had been carried out. Notice that since the project was

aborted, the (1) sequence was never reached, but the research went from (2) to (4), with exposure by the media (via the Chilean legislature) being responsible for cancellation.

### *The Tuskegee Study*

Another study where a negative cost/benefit ratio for a relatively powerless group, in combination with a positive cost/benefit ratio for a more powerful group, led to an ethical dilemma was the Tuskegee study (see Smith 1981). A group of black men known to have syphilis were the subject of an experiment by U.S. Public Health Service physicians beginning in 1932. The men allegedly were examined but not medically treated, apparently to their detriment, as many died or were severely incapacitated. The allegation is that the government benefited by learning about the disease, but at great cost to the subjects who apparently were unaware that treatment was withheld. There are further allegations that the subjects were victimized because of their relative powerlessness resulting from achieved and ascribed status (impoverished, black males).

This is a classical (3)—(2)—(1) sequence, though in actuality (3) and (2) are merged as the researchers (physicians) (2) were employed by the sponsors (3), the Public Health Service. In such a sequence, the sponsors and researchers (2) and (3) used professional role abeyance to “play God” and withhold medical service from needy patients at their expense (cost exceeds benefits for patients [1]) for the benefit of the sponsors and researchers, supposedly with benefit extending to the larger public (5).

### *The Army Stress Study*

An interesting twist on the basic (3)—(2)—(1) sequence is exemplified by a study of psychological stress in which the research subjects were army recruits (Kelman, 1967). It again involved cost/benefit ratios that were beneficial for the sponsors (army) (3) and the researchers (2), but harmful for the subjects (army recruits) (1). An interesting twist on the classical case is that in this case, there was no *actual* harm to the recruits (no *physical* negative cost/benefit ratio), as in reality they were in no danger. The twist is that they were *deceived not* to hide danger, as in the Tuskegee and Camelot cases, but rather *to simulate danger when there was none so as to induce stress*. This was done by taking the subjects up in an airplane and falsely telling them that it was going to crash in order to study their reactions to stress. However, except for this reverse deceit twist, this case has in common with other (3)—(2)—(1) sequences the fact that the cost/benefit ratio appeared negative for the subjects (1), and positive for both the researchers (2) and sponsors (3). The research also entailed a great disparity between the roles and the achieved and ascribed statuses of the research subjects (1), on the one hand (low); and of the researchers and sponsors (2) and (3) on the other hand (high). The research also included norm abeyance by the re-

searchers, where they used their status to behave toward subjects in a manner that they would have engaged in the course of normal social interaction.

### *The Problematic Case of KAP*

All cases of ethical violations discussed here have been quite blatant, leading one to question whether a model was necessary for the prediction of ethical dilemmas. Perhaps what is needed now is a more problematic case, which will provide a chance to more thoroughly explore the efficacy of the model and to examine its implications without being sidetracked by glaring ethical inadequacies. With this in mind, let us analyze the case of the Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) studies.

KAP comprised a series of sample surveys undertaken in a number of developing countries. These household surveys generally had women respondents, and asked questions about knowledge, attitudes, and practices on fertility matters and birth control. The researchers were demographers who received funding from the Population Council, the Ford Foundation, and later the Agency for International Development (Warwick 1983, p. 351). Following the earlier scheme for the prediction of ethical dilemmas, let us examine the respective benefit/cost ratios and status configurations for all three publics chiefly involved (the media —(4), and general public—(5) are only tangentially involved). These publics are the subjects (1), the researchers (2) and the sponsors (3). Recalling our earlier discussion, an ethical dilemma would be clearly predicted if subjects (1) had a *negative* benefit/cost ratio and low status configurations (ascribed and achieved), while both researchers (2) and sponsors (3) had positive benefit/cost ratios and high status configurations. Any pattern which departed from this would not be predictive of severe ethical dilemmas. Perusing the collective KAP studies, we see no apparent reason for alarm, even though Warwick (1983, p. 361) has alluded to “ethical problems posed by KAP surveys.”

Let us first examine the benefit/cost ratio and status characteristics for respondents (1). According to Warwick (1983, p. 352) there is cost to respondents in that they are asked questions about sensitive sexual topics. However, there is no indication that embarrassment is extreme, or that privacy is invaded. Also, interviews are of relatively short duration and relatively painless. Thus, costs are relatively slight and comparable to those found in all fertility surveys. Moreover, there seem to be substantial benefits here. Warwick (1983, p. 350) indicates that some demographers have found respondents eager for family planning information, and thus eager to cooperate with KAP studies which might prove *beneficial* in this regard. Thus, the benefit/cost ratio, while difficult to quantify, is not clearly negative, and may in fact be positive for respondents. The next issue is the question of respondent’s status, both achieved and ascribed. While the respondents may be mostly younger females (Warwick 1983, p. 355), persons of higher achieved and ascribed status also have a vested interest in the results, and the elite of both sexes are concerned about the implications for their country. The absence

of a negative benefit/cost ratio for respondents, along with the lack of disadvantaged respondent characteristics, would indicate preliminarily that no ethical problem exists in the traditional sense of respondent abuse, particularly to a powerless population.

Nevertheless, we also need to examine the other publics to satisfy ourselves that no deceit exists, or that other publics are not harmed unethically. Examining researchers (2), we see benefits in the form of research funding and publications. The only unusual cost to them, in addition to the usual complications and frustrations of cross-cultural research, is the alleged "scientific costs of mission politics" (Warwick 1983, p. 353-54). Warwick (1983, p. 354) refers to a climate "in which 'quick and dirty' KAP studies were not only tolerated but tacitly encouraged by sponsors seeking immediately usable results." While Warwick sees this as a "cost" to the research process, it may not necessarily be seen as a cost to individual researchers. Further, it is not clear that there are more "costs" in these KAP studies than in the average fertility study, and further not clear that any costs that do exist are caused by "mission politics." Still further, in terms of achieved and ascribed characteristics, these researchers are average academic demographers. While clearly higher in status than their young female respondents, they were not necessarily higher in status than some of the indigenous elite having a vested interest in the KAP studies. The overall conclusion for researchers (2) as compared to respondents (1) is that the former do not have motivation for deceit in the form of high benefits to be gained (and in fact have clear costs, as the scientific value of the results has been questioned).

Turning now to an analysis of sponsors (3) we see that this is where the political implications enter the analysis. Warwick (1983, p. 351) documents that the Agency for International Development (United States Government) was among the sponsors, and shows that the KAP surveys were valued not only for their scientific use, but also for their political use, primarily to convince the elite of the country to adopt birth control programs. Thus, the benefits to the sponsors were the achievement of their political aims (contraceptive programs in respective countries) and the costs were the funding they granted. Their status was of course high.

The publics cannot be considered in isolation. A high benefit/cost ratio for one public is not indicative of ethical dilemmas. The optimal research project has high benefit/cost ratios for *all* publics, so that it constitutes a win-win situation. A high benefit/cost ratio for the sponsors would only bode ill if other publics, specifically the respondents and researchers, had low benefit/cost ratios. In this case there could be adversarial interests in the research, and the sponsors could be motivated to gain their benefits at the expense of others, thus generating ethical dilemmas. This situation is missing here. Thus, we would not predict major ethical problems, and in fact do not find any.

What then, is the situation that prompts Warwick (1983) to discuss "scientific costs" generated by "politics?" The major contention is that the quality of scientific work in the respective KAP studies declined over time, and that work was less

adequate when politically-sponsored funding was more available. Warwick (1983) sees scientific costs in poor survey conceptualization, questionnaire design (including the inclusion of leading questions), interviewing and quality control, and analysis and interpretation.

In summary, Warwick's main charge is not really of an ethical dilemma, but of general research carelessness, and a decline in research quality over time. He attributes this largely to time pressures (Warwick 1983, p. 354). In terms of our general model, there is *no* holistic pattern of benefit/cost and status discrepancies that is predictive of ethical abuse, and in fact we conclude that none exists. What we do see is a general research carelessness that probably is often found in survey research, especially in studies done in foreign countries in remote field areas far from bureaucratic control. The rigor of the research may have been lacking, but this is nothing unusual in social science, and does not pose an ethical dilemma in the sense of the other cases we have examined.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

It is now time to discuss the implications of the study, specifically with an attempt to see what we understand from this discussion that we did not already know. The analysis is of course programmatic and unfinished, and is severely hampered by space limitations. While ethics is an important topic deserving of book-length treatments, there are nevertheless a number of implications that emerge even from a short article such as this.

1. A multidimensional and pluralistic model such as this one is needed for clarifying controversies over ethics. Perusal of the literature shows that most prior discussions of ethics were inconclusive, with persisting arguments about whether violations had occurred or not. The complexity of this model is more adequate for the complex problem to be analyzed. Specifically, we have shown that often it is not the absolute existence of benefit/cost and status levels for a given public that is predictive of ethical dilemmas, but rather it is the relative discrepancy between publics in these areas. In a sense our model is a sort of status inconsistency model, but space limitations preclude development of this line of reasoning.

2. One implication just discussed is that a sequential or piecemeal analysis of all parts of the ethics puzzle is often not as illustrative as a holistic model which shows not only independent plural publics but also their interrelations and interactions, particularly exchange relationships and power differentials. Another implication of this research is that even a holistic analysis is insufficient without proper conceptualization. Most prior analysis of ethics has been inconclusive because of ad hoc analytical strategies. This analysis is notable for applying sociological theory, particularly exchange, status, and role theory, to the analysis of an important problem—research ethics. Too often sociologists are guilty of neglecting their rich conceptual armory in lieu of ad hoc or intuitive conceptualizations that often prove incomplete and ineffective. Further, consistent conceptualization such as an exchange framework provides a better foundation



for the subsequent addition of other conceptual schemes such as status inconsistency.

3. Examining the actual cases above, it seems clear that our model, while admittedly in the developmental stage, already has provided clearer analysis of the important ethical issues than prior models. In the first cases examined, our model confirmed the alleged existence of ethical problems, but went further in showing the publics involved, the sequence of interrelationships among publics, and the specific theoretical components responsible for the problems. In the last and more problematic case, our analysis was less ad hoc and more complete than previous ones. We called into question the notion of serious ethical problems, and showed that in fact the KAP studies were largely guilty only of careless work stemming perhaps from bureaucratic or political involvement, but not indicative of harmful actions to respondents or others. It is very important that our model be sufficiently complex in theoretical terms to specify clearly the sort of ethical problem and the respective public involved, and also to exonerate parties who are not really guilty of severe violations.

4. Another thing we can understand from this analysis, which was not always clear in previous analyses of ethics, is that solutions to ethical controversies may in some cases involve measurement and further specification of various dimensions of the problem. For example, we may have to precisely measure class variables (such as income) of the various parties involved in order to determine status or power discrepancies. We could then perhaps buttress our model by exploring the status inconsistency approach, which has a clear statistical interpretation.

5. A final implication is the clear need for further research along the lines suggested here. As the society becomes more complex, both in terms of bureaucracy and government involvement, the potential impact of ethical issues will be heightened. A complex, theoretically-based approach to ethics is the chief hope for providing the tools that both sociologists and policy researchers need for providing humane and ethical research out of the myriad involvements of sponsors, researchers, research subjects, other publics, and machines (such as computers). For further discussion see Bailey (1987).

The present application of exchange theory indicates that sociological insights can indeed be applied successfully to social policy. Further research is needed to continue this process of examining the particular concepts and methodological skills that will prove most valuable for one aspect of policy research—the important area of research ethics.

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