

The IRB and Ethics in Human Subjects Research

Purpose

The IRB (Internal Review Board) is the most important regulatory board for all Human and Animal Subjects Research at research institutions. It governs everything from clinical trials to psychological research, as well as nearly anything where you are collecting or identifying information about a human subject. With regards to animal research, the IRB ensures the care and well-being of animals used for both research and educational purposes. This skill module will introduce you to the basics of the IRB as well as to some highly debated social psychology research that would not pass the standards of today's IRB.

The IRB

I. Purpose of the IRB

The IRB looks for three things when deciding whether to approve a project:

- i. Is the risk to the human subjects minimized?
- ii. Have all subjects been fully informed about the research and any risks involved? Have they given their consent to participate?
- iii. Is the experiment equitable?

IRBs were first formed across the nation after the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the most infamous biomedical research study, came into the public eye (if you don't know what this is, look it up).

II. How do you get a project approved?

Write a proposal! Every IRB sets their own guidelines for how the proposal should be formatted, but one thing is always the same: your proposal must be submitted and approved by the committee before any part of your experiment may begin. This is especially troublesome as not only does the committee only meet once a month, they often don't approve your proposal on the first try.

To look at who is on the board:

- i. Go to the UT IRB website at <http://www.utexas.edu/research/rsc/humansubjects/about.html>
- ii. In the left sidebar, go to "Human Subjects" then click on "IRB Members." Note that if there is not someone on the board that has enough expertise in the area you want to study to help make an informed decision, they will bring in extra community members (usually PhDs, JDs, or MDs) to help.

How do I write the proposal?

- i. On the IRB website, go to "Human Subjects" then click on "Forms."
- ii. About halfway down click on the link called "Required Proposal Format" to download a Word document called "topics.doc" This form has everything you'd need to include to write a proper proposal to the IRB.

Your Assignment

- I. After reading through the outline of the required proposal format as found above, write at least one paragraph (~150 words) about the part you found the most interesting, as well as its importance with respect to the three purposes of the IRB.
- II. We'll now look at three very controversial psychology experiments:

- a. The Asch Conformity Experiment
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYIh4MkcfjA>) If the link is broken, watch the one by equivideos or any other original footage.
Task: Do you think it was okay for Asch to make his participants feel embarrassed or psychologically inferior because they do not agree with the rest of the group? Explain.
- b. Milgram's Obedience Experiment
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6GxluljT3w>) -This version is a reproduction of the original experiment. If the link is broken, search for the Derren Brown version of this experiment.
Task: Many of the participants in this experiment (the teachers) were mentally traumatized by their participation but continued due to the prodding of the experimenter. A few participants actually thought they killed the learner. With this sort of psychological risk to the participant, do you think this experiment is justified? Defend your answer.
- c. The Stanford Prison Experiment
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmwSC5fS40w&>) If this link is broken, search for the video by APPsychVids.
Task: Do you think this experiment was the most effective way to establish how roles can affect attitudes and behaviors? What are your thoughts on the final conversation between the "prisoner" and "guard" participants? Do you think it would be more traumatizing to be a prisoner and recognize what terrible behavior your peers are capable of exhibiting, or do you think it would be worse to be a guard and see the kind of cruel behavior you are capable of? Write at least 200 words.