

The Social Responsibility of Researchers in Sociology and Rural Sociology: A Module for the Open Seminar in Research Ethics

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1. Introduction

The National Science Foundation is sponsoring research ethics programs for doctoral students studying at land grant universities in the United States.¹ In these research ethics programs, doctoral students enroll in a general research ethics course and participate in subject-specific research ethics modules. In this paper, we outline a module about research ethics in the fields of sociology and rural sociology.² First, we provide an overview of the differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences. Then we discuss types of sociological research. After this, we introduce ethical standards, issues, and sanctions in sociology. Finally, we discuss the ambiguity of research ethics in sociology by presenting a case study, critiquing the case study, and then posing questions for further discussion.

Doing Sociological Research in the Social World

As early as the 1930s, scholars have contemplated the fundamental differences between the social and natural sciences (Van de Walle 1932). Social science involves the investigation of human relationships, norms, and rituals in the social world. Specialized fields in the social sciences include anthropology, psychology, economics, and sociology (Henslin 1995). Research in the social sciences is both similar to and different from research in the biological and natural sciences. Natural science involves the exploration of events in our natural environment such as, global warming. Specialized fields in the natural sciences include biology, chemistry, and physics (Henslin 1995). Although the social sciences and natural sciences investigate different aspects of the world, both develop scientific knowledge based on empirical observation using rigorous methods of data collection.³

¹ For more information on the LANGURE program, please see: <http://www.chass.ncsu.edu/langure/>.

² Depending on the institution, sociology and rural sociology may be integrated or distinct programs. Given their common foundation with the sociological paradigm, we treat them as one discipline in this module.

³ For more information on the foundations of social science, please see Babbie 2007.

Several purposes of research and data collection exist. Some data collection projects are small-scale educational exercises, while others are large-scale, grant-funded, and conducted by specialized research organizations. An example of an educational exercise is doing a small survey for a project in a research methodology class. An example of large-scale data collection is a grant-funded national random sample survey conducted by a specialized research organization that the principal investigators analyze to produce publications in scholarly journals.

As a sociology student, before beginning a project, it is important to ask yourself whether your data collection meets the federal and institutional definitions of research at your university. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Human Resource Protections (2005), the definition of research is:

[...] a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to *generalizable* knowledge. Activities which meet this definition constitute research for purposes of this policy, whether or not they are conducted or supported under a program which is considered research for other purposes. For example, some demonstration and service programs may include research activities. (n.p.)

For more information on the Office of Human Resource Protections, please see: <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm#46.102>.

Test Your Knowledge:

Directions: Please choose the *best* answer.

1. Which is a specialized field in the social sciences?
 - a. chemistry
 - b. entomology
 - c. psychology
 - d. geology

2. According to the Office of Human Resource Protections (2005), research is described as “[...] a _____, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to _____.”
 - a. method of data collection; individual’s knowledge
 - b. piece of scholarly work; unethical practices
 - c. systematic investigation; generalizable knowledge
 - d. tool; investigation techniques

Engaging in Sociological Research

Social scientists conduct research for a variety of reasons. In doing so, they employ multiple data collection and research methods. For more information on sociological research methodology see: <http://www.umsl.edu/~rkell/010/method.html>.

Evaluation, intervention, consultation, and academic investigation are purposes of social science research. Evaluations are used to assess the value or appropriateness of a program or policy. Evaluation research may reveal if an implemented social program, such as a public health initiative, is achieving its goals. Evaluation research is a common form of action research⁴ and is usually conducted in collaboration with other researchers or members of the participating group, community, or social program undergoing evaluation (Esterberg 2002).

In addition, sociologists also evaluate social interventions. An intervention may be an improvement plan, such as an educational training package, or an experiment introduced by researchers to help solve a social problem. One example of an intervention is assessing the effectiveness of lectures versus small group discussions on learning outcomes in a classroom. Interventions are also used in action research to accomplish larger organizational or community goals (Robinson and Read 1998).

Sociologists are also employed as consultants. Consultants are researchers who are paid by an outside group or organization to give professional advice or conduct research for a fee. Sociologists are frequently asked to consult during legal trials as expert witnesses or jury selection researchers.⁵ Sociologists who are paid consultants must carefully balance their personal investment in the research, the financial interests involved, and the federal and institutional regulations on research ethics. When consultants experience difficulty balancing their obligations, they may encounter issues of “conflict of interest”.⁶ Universities have specific rules and requirements about faculty reporting consulting activities in order to avoid conflicts of interest.

Most sociological research is conducted for purely academic purposes. Academic research can be described as any experimental and/or theoretical investigation conducted to produce knowledge and contribute to previous academic literature with the goal of knowledge advancement. However, academic research may also consist of or incorporate

⁴ Action research is a strategy implemented to solve an organizational or institutional problem. Social research may or may not involve intervention and/or evaluation strategies (Robinson and Reed 1998: 2).

⁵ For first hand accounts of these roles, please see: *Witnessing for Sociology: Sociology in Court* by Pamela J. Jenkins and Steve Kroll-Smith.

⁶ Conflicts of interest occur when interests and/or commitments compromise judgment, research reports, or interactions with research subjects or clients. Objectivity in research has been a major focus in research ethics on a national level. For more information, please see the National Institute for Health (NIH) website: <http://grants2.nih.gov/grants/policy/COI/resources.htm>. For information on how conflict of interest is outlined in federal regulations on human subjects research (45 CFR 46), please see: <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/finreltn/fguid.pdf>.

elements of evaluation, consultation, or intervention research. All types of sociological research need to be assessed in terms of current professional standards of reliability and validity.

Test Your Knowledge:

Directions: Please choose the *best* answer.

1. _____ is used to assess the value or appropriateness of a program or policy.
 - a. Intervention
 - b. Academic research
 - c. Evaluation
 - d. Consultation

2. _____ may be improvement plans, such as educational training packages, or experiments introduced by researchers to help solve social problems.
 - a. Interventions
 - b. Academic research
 - c. Evaluations
 - d. Consultations

3. When _____ experience difficulty balancing their obligations, they may encounter issues of _____.
 - a. Intervention researchers; fraud
 - b. academic researchers; notoriety
 - c. evaluators; disbarment
 - d. consultants; conflict of interest

4. _____ research can be described as any experimental and/or theoretical investigation conducted to produce knowledge and contribute to previous academic literature with the goal of knowledge advancement.
 - a. Intervention
 - b. Academic
 - c. Evaluation
 - d. Consultation

Starting Your Research Project

In your career as a sociology student, you will conduct your own research either for a class project, a thesis, a dissertation, or as part of a research assistantship. As a sociology student, your research may or may not directly involve the use of humans. That is, instead of conducting face-to-face interviews with humans, you may acquire a data set about human subjects that was collected by someone else and made available through a data library or by a government agency (e.g., Census data). This is called secondary data analysis.

Prior to engaging in primary data collection or secondary data analysis, you MUST gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval which ensures that your research meets current federal and institutional regulations on human subjects research. Note: you must gain IRB approval BEFORE conducting a methodological pre-test or pilot study.⁷ In some institutions, secondary data analysis does require IRB review in order to establish that it is exempt from the regulations governing primary data collection.

Some universities require that investigators submitting proposals for IRB review complete a web-based human subjects training module. The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI: see <http://www.citiprogram.org/>) is used by some universities as its source for human subjects training. Investigators should check with their institutions' research or IRB office to learn about requirements and options for human subjects research training.

Institutional approval was established because of profound neglect for research ethics. An often cited example of unethical research is the Center for Disease Control sponsored *Tuskegee Syphilis Study*, which led to the development of *The Belmont Report* in 1979.⁸

Engaging in sociological research as a student does not exempt you from federal regulations on research. These regulations are outlined in 45 CFR Part 46 which is commonly referred to as "the common rule." Student researchers must also comply with their institutions' regulations on human subjects research. Noncompliance with federal and institutional regulations can lead to severe sanctions including charges of scientific misconduct. If convicted, disciplinary action may include: a failing grade, academic dismissal and/or debarment from future research. Sanctions vary according to severity of the case and institutional policy.

If you have any DOUBT as to whether a project is or is NOT human subject research, call your university IRB or office on research compliance. You should apply for IRB approval at least eight weeks before you intend to start your research. The process of

⁷ For historical information about the formation of IRBs, please see: http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/irb/irb_introduction.htm#b1.

⁸ For a detailed historical timeline of events, please see: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/tuskegee/time.htm>.

gaining approval will depend on the type of study you have proposed and whether or not it will require an exempt, expedited, or full-committee review.⁹ To begin the application process for IRB approval of non-medical, human subjects research at NCSU, forms can be downloaded on this website: <http://www.ncsu.edu/sparcs/IRB/forms.html>.¹⁰ Other universities offer similar forms through their institutional research offices.

The purpose of IRB review is to assess whether your study poses risk to human subjects. If the IRB committee determines that your study poses more than minimal risk to human subjects, they may require you to implement additional provisions to protect these subjects. For instance, when researchers incorporate minors or other vulnerable groups in their research design, then they must give special attention to protect them. Many sociologists study vulnerable populations like elementary school children. In this case, the IRB may require that sociologists gain written, informed consent from the school district, parents, and school children (Family Health International 2006). On the other hand, if the IRB committee determines that your research project is of *minimal* risk, as in many secondary data analyses, then your project's review process may be expedited or except from full committee review.

Test Your Knowledge:

Directions: Please choose the *best* answer.

1. _____ data refers to a data set which someone else collects.
 - a. Secondary
 - b. Primary
 - c. Qualitative
 - d. Quantitative

2. Which study led to the formation of *The Belmont Report* in 1979?
 - a. the *Stanford Prison Experiment*
 - b. the *Tuskegee Syphilis Study*
 - c. the *Milgram Experiment*
 - d. the *Edward Jenner Experiments*

⁹ At NCSU, the IRB chair determines the type of review based on the researcher's submitted materials. The IRB chair grants exempted review for projects which involve no more than minimal risk. Expedited review involves review by 2-3 IRB members. Expedited review may take from 2 to 4 weeks. Full Committee Review requires approval by the entire IRB committee and may take 4 to 6 weeks. For more information, please see NCSU IRB committee policies and procedures: <http://www.ncsu.edu/sparcs/IRB/policies.html>.

¹⁰ To learn more about the use of humans in research, please see LANGURE's core course lecture 6: [Use of humans in research](#).

3. Which is NOT a severe sanction for noncompliance with federal and institutional regulations?
 - a. a failing grade
 - b. academic dismissal
 - c. corporal punishment
 - d. debarment from future research

4. When engaging in sociological research (especially when studying vulnerable populations like prisons and children), you should apply for _____ approval at least _____ before you intend to start your research.
 - a. Institutional Review Board; six weeks
 - b. Institutional Review Board; six months
 - c. Constitutional approval; six weeks
 - d. Constitutional approval; six months

2. Research Ethics in Sociology

Scientific Misconduct

The term “ethics” has many definitions. Some scholars define ethics as compliant behavior. Using this definition, sociologists are ethical when they adhere to ethical guidelines and avoid violating them (Comstock 2006).¹¹ In this section, we introduce ethical standards that sociologists should follow and we address consequences that sociologists may face if they breach these standards.¹²

Sociologists are bound by the American Sociological Association’s (ASA) code of professional ethics.¹³ This code examines the role of sociological researchers and outlines ethical standards that researchers should follow (ASA 1999). By adhering to these ethical guidelines, researchers can avoid ethical issues like scientific misconduct. According to Altman and Herson (1997), scientific misconduct includes:

[...] failing to retain significant research data for a reasonable period; maintaining inadequate research records, especially for results that are published or are relied on by others; conferring or requesting authorship on the basis of a specialized service or contribution that is not significantly related to the research reported in a paper (for example, listing the lab director as a co-author even though that person did no work related to the paper); refusing to give peers reasonable access to unique research materials or data that support published papers; using inappropriate statistical or other methods of measurement to enhance the significance of research findings; inadequately supervising research subordinates or exploiting them; and misrepresenting speculations as fact or releasing preliminary research results, especially in the public media, without providing sufficient data to allow peers to judge the validity of the results or to reproduce experiments. (3)¹⁴

After defining scientific misconduct in general, we can discuss four types of scientific misconduct: delegation and supervision, non-exploitation, reporting on research, and public communications.

Test Your Knowledge:

Directions: Please choose the *best* answer.

¹¹ By defining ethics as compliant behavior, we are viewing ethical behavior as “external” to the individual (Comstock 2006). This means that the sanction of failing to adhere to ethical standards makes the individual more likely to adhere to the ethical standards (Jacobs 2005).

¹² To learn more about making ethical decisions, please see LANGURE’s core course lecture 2: [Ethical principles supporting research policies](#); lecture 3: [Four ethical principles and their justifications](#); and lecture 4: [A method for making ethical decisions](#).

¹³ To learn more about the American Sociological Association’s (ASA) code of professional ethics, please see <http://www.asanet.org/page.wv?section=Ethics&name=Ethics>.

¹⁴ To learn more about scientific misconduct, please see LANGURE’s core course lecture 8 on [Research misconduct](#).

1. If defining ethics as *compliant behavior*, sociologists are ethical when they _____.
 - a. critically think about being ethical in their research endeavors
 - b. breach institutional regulations
 - c. adhere to ethical guidelines
 - d. commit academic dishonesty

2. According to Altman and Hernon (1997), which is NOT scientific misconduct?
 - a. delegating reasonable tasks to others
 - b. misrepresenting preliminary findings as facts
 - c. hoarding data that support published research
 - d. demanding authorship without significantly contributing to research

ASA Code 4: Delegation and Supervision

The American Sociological Association (ASA) provides ethical guidelines that relate to scientific misconduct. Certain guidelines address the relationship between the professor and the student. For instance, the ASA has guidelines that explain how professors can ethically supervise their students: “Sociologists provide proper training and supervision to their students, supervisees, or employees and take reasonable steps to see that such persons perform services responsibly, competently, and ethically. Sociologists delegate to their students, supervisees, or employees only those responsibilities that such persons, based on their education, training, or experience, can reasonably be expected to perform either independently or with the level of supervision provided ” (ASA 1999: 6). This ethical guideline requires that the professor adequately train and supervise students and reasonably assign tasks to students.

ASA Code 6: Non-exploitation

The American Sociological Association (ASA) presents another ethical guideline relating to the relationship between professors and students. The ASA explains: “Whether for personal, economic, or professional advantage, sociologists do not exploit persons over whom they have a direct or indirect supervisory, evaluative, or other authority such as students, supervisees, employees, or research participants” (ASA 1999: 6).¹⁵ This ethical standard ensures that sociologists do not abuse their authority over others, thereby protecting individuals and fostering an equitable work environment.

ASA Code 13.04: Reporting on Research & ASA Code 10.01: Public Communications

The American Sociological Association’s ethical guidelines state that “Sociologists do not fabricate data or falsify results in their publications” (ASA 1999: 15). What if researchers report false data, but do not know that they are doing so? According to the American Sociological Association’s statement on public communication, researchers are still accountable: “Sociologists take steps to ensure the accuracy of all public communications. Such public communications include, but not limited to, directory listings; personal resumes or curriculum vitae; advertising; brochures or printed matter; interviews or comments to the media; statements in legal proceedings; lectures and public oral presentations; or other published materials” (ASA 1999: 8).¹⁶ Even if researchers unintentionally fabricate or falsify data, they are still accountable. Researchers must take sufficient measures to validate their findings, especially when communicating with public sources.

¹⁵ To learn more about mentoring, please see LANGURE’s core course lecture 5: [Mentoring](#).

¹⁶ To learn more information on reporting on research and public communication, please see LANGURE’s core course lecture 12: [Proper experimental design, data collection, and statistical interpretation](#).

Sanctions for Scientific Misconduct

The Committee on Professional Ethics (COPE) of the ASA receives and investigates complaints of ethical misconduct.¹⁷ If COPE finds a breach in ethical standards, then COPE may impose the following sanctions: (1) private reprimand where COPE sends you a private letter stipulating conditions that you must follow; (2) public reprimand where COPE sends you a letter stipulating conditions that you must follow and then COPE makes that letter publicly available; (3) denial of privileges where COPE removes several privileges from you including, but not limited to, removing privileges to attend and present papers at ASA annual meetings; and (4) termination of membership where COPE temporarily or permanently terminates your ASA membership (ASA 1999).

Academic Honesty

Student sociologists are also bound by their university's academic honesty policy. Although policies vary by institution, North Carolina State University provides a useful definition of academic dishonesty: "Academic dishonesty is the giving, taking, or presenting of information or material by a student that unethically or fraudulently aids oneself or another on any work which is to be considered in the determination of a grade or the completion of academic requirements or the enhancement of that student's record or academic career" (NCSU 2002: n.p.). Using this definition, students violate ethical principles when they plagiarize, cheat, help someone else to cheat, fabricate data, or falsify data. Similar statements and policies can be found at other universities.

Sanctions for Academic Dishonesty

Just as definitions of academic dishonesty vary by institution, sanctions for academic dishonesty also vary by institution. Generally speaking, an institution can reprimand a student that commits academic dishonesty in several ways, depending on the extent and severity of the dishonesty. At North Carolina State University, these sanctions include, but are not limited to, placing the student on academic integrity probation, reducing the student's grade on the assignment or in the class, requiring the student to participate in community service activities, or suspending or expelling the student (NCSU 2002).

In this section, we introduced ethical standards and consequences of failing to adhere to these standards. In the following sections, we use a case study to illustrate an example of scientific misconduct and academic dishonesty.

¹⁷ This applies to both members and recent members of the ASA.

Test Your Knowledge:

Directions: Please choose the *best* answer.

1. The American Sociological Association's ethical guideline on delegation and supervision requires that sociologists adequately _____ and supervise students, supervisees, or employees and reasonably _____ them.
 - a. mentor; maltreat
 - b. train; assign tasks to
 - c. evaluate; humiliate
 - d. educate; abuse

2. Which word describes sociologists abusing authority over others?
 - a. delegation
 - b. supervision
 - c. exploitation
 - d. communication

3. If researchers report false data, but do not know that they are doing so, are they accountable?
 - a. No, researchers are not accountable for reporting false data.
 - b. No, researchers are not accountable for unintentional errors.
 - c. No, researchers do not need to take measures to validate findings.
 - d. Yes, researchers must take sufficient measures to validate findings.

4. According to the Committee on Professional Ethics, which is NOT a sanction for breaching an ethical standard?
 - a. termination of membership
 - b. private reprimand
 - c. renewal of membership
 - d. public reprimand

5. Students commit academic dishonesty when they fabricate data or falsify data.
 - a. true
 - b. false

6. Which is NOT a possible sanction for committing academic dishonesty?
 - a. placing the student on academic integrity probation
 - b. reducing the student's grade on the assignment or in the class
 - c. placing the student in prison for fraud
 - d. requiring the student to participate in community service activities

3. The Case Study of Professor Schoenthaler

Few resources exist within sociology to teach students about research ethics. Green and Salem (1983) teach research ethics by presenting students with case studies concerning ethical research practice. Sweet (1999) modifies this approach, having students actively participate in a mock institutional review board which evaluates hypothetical research projects. Likewise, the LANGURE program uses heuristics, including narratives and discipline-specific case studies, to provoke discussion about research ethics (Comstock 2006).

In this module, we present a heuristic tool – a case study – which uses data from public sources, primarily news reports available through the Internet. These data provide information about Professor Schoenthaler, a sociology and criminal justice professor at California State University at Stanislaus. In 2004, Professor Schoenthaler sought to determine if Scott Peterson, accused of murdering his wife and unborn son, could receive a fair trial in Stanislaus County, California¹⁸. Professor Schoenthaler conducted a Peterson-bias survey across ten counties (AAPOR 2004; Stapley and Cote 2004; “Students Admit Cheating” 2004; “Survey Says Scott Peterson” 2004; Turner 2004; “Who Wants to Take” 2004). Available data do not indicate whether Professor Schoenthaler’s research was approved by an institutional review board. Also, we do not know if this research was an independent project or contracted for by the defense or prosecution.

Professor Schoenthaler enlisted the help of sixty-five criminal justice students. He “asked” each student to conduct twenty telephone surveys to determine the attitudes of California residents toward the guilt of Scott Peterson. This was a required part of their grade for a class. The students had one week to conduct the telephone surveys (“Survey Says Scott Peterson” 2004). The students took six hours to complete these surveys, with one additional hour of practice (Stapley and Cote 2004). Even though the students were not trained or compensated for long-distance calls or for their time, conducting telephone surveys counted towards 20 percent of their course grade (AAPOR 2004; Stapley and Cote 2004; “Students Admit Cheating” 2004; “Who Wants to Take” 2004).

According to Stapley and Cote (2004), “Formulas developed to detect fraud didn’t alert [Professor Schoenthaler] to anything unusual” (n.p.). In other words, Professor Schoenthaler used formulas to validate the data collected by his students (Stapley and Cote 2004) instead of personally calling residents who completed phone surveys to verify the data (AAPOR 2004; Stapley and Cote 2004). Based on this measure, he assumed that the data were valid.

¹⁸ The public information about this case does not specifically acknowledge Professor Schoenthaler’s motivation for collecting these data.

Later, Schoenthaler testified as a witness¹⁹ and reported his results as evidence in the Scott Peterson murder trial (AAPOR 2004; “Survey Says Scott Peterson” 2004). Schoenthaler’s results suggested that “[...] nearly sixty percent of potential jurors in the valley felt Scott Peterson was probably guilty. In the Bay Area, that dropped to just over fifty-five percent. But in Stanislaus County, almost seventy percent said he probably killed his wife, then unborn son” (“Survey Says Scott Peterson” 2004; Stapley and Cote 2004; “Students Admit Cheating” 2004; “Who Wants to Take” 2004). When asked about his confidence in the validity of the data, Schoenthaler commented: “We have a great degree of confidence in the answers that were given in the community polls that we do historically. And that's why I think this one's going to be accurate, too” (“Survey Says Scott Peterson” 2004).

Several students contacted a local newspaper and admitted to falsifying survey data (“Students Admit Cheating” 2004; Turner 2004; “Who Wants to Take” 2004). This led California State University at Stanislaus to conduct an investigation. The university found that at least twenty-five students falsified data (Turner 2005). These students claimed that they had difficulty completing the assignment because of they lacked time, training, and money (Stapley and Cote 2004; “Students Admit Cheating” 2004; Turner 2004).

¹⁹ The public record does not explicitly reveal whether Professor Schoenthaler testified as a witness for the prosecution or the defense.

4. Critique of the Case Study

The term “ethics” has many definitions. Sociologists are ethical when they adhere to ethical guidelines or standards that outline the “right” and “wrong” ways of conducting research (Comstock 2006). In this section, we analyze the Schoenthaler case to assess compliance with sociological research ethical standards. In essence, we are doing a content analysis of public records. Our analysis has limitations; it relies on publicly available data and assumes that these data are accurate. At this point in the analysis, Professor Schoenthaler has not been given the opportunity to comment on the case.

Scientific Misconduct

ASA Code 4: Delegation and Supervision

Based on the publicly available information, it appears that Professor Schoenthaler did not adequately supervise his students (AAPOR 2004; Stapley and Cote 2004; “Students Admit Cheating” 2004; “Who Wants to Take” 2004). Also, it seems like he delegated responsibilities to his students that he could not reasonably expect them to complete. As previously stated, Professor Schoenthaler required each student to survey public opinion attitudes of twenty California residents as part of a class project. The surveys were supposed to take six hours to complete, with one additional hour of practice (Stapley and Cote 2004). The students had one week to complete the surveys (“Survey Says Scott Peterson” 2004) and were not given any compensation for their long-distance calls (AAPOR 2004; Stapley and Cote 2004; “Students Admit Cheating” 2004; “Who Wants to Take” 2004). These facts suggest that Professor Schoenthaler failed to give his students the supervision, training, and resources (e.g., time and money) needed to complete this assignment.

ASA Code 6: Non-exploitation

Our analysis of the publicly available data suggests that Professor Schoenthaler exploited his students – people whom he had direct evaluative authority over. Professor Schoenthaler enlisted the help of sixty-five criminal justice students. He required each student to complete twenty lengthy public opinion surveys. The students’ participation counted towards twenty percent of their course grade and they were not financially compensated for long-distance calls (AAPOR 2004; Stapley and Cote 2004; “Students Admit Cheating” 2004; “Who Wants to Take” 2004). Thus, our interpretation of the public record is that Professor Schoenthaler created a lose-lose situation, whereby students had to decide to sacrifice their grade, their own financial resources, and/or their integrity in order to complete the assignment.

ASA Code 13.04: Reporting on Research &
ASA Code 10.01: Public Communications

The American Sociological Association's policy on reporting on research prohibits researchers from fabricating or falsifying data. Even if researchers unintentionally fabricate or falsify data, they are still accountable. Researchers must take sufficient measures to validate their findings, especially when communicating with public sources. Professor Schoenthaler reported his results as evidence in the Scott Peterson murder trial (AAPOR, 2004; "Survey Says Scott Peterson," 2004). Schoenthaler testified in court that he was confident in the validity of the data, because he used formulas to confirm the validity of the data (Stapley and Cote, 2004). However, our analysis of the public record indicates that he failed to take further measures to verify the data; he did not double check the accuracy of his students' data by making follow-up calls to the survey respondents (AAPOR, 2004; Stapley and Cote, 2004).

Academic Honesty

Although we already discussed academic honesty briefly in this paper, we want to reiterate its importance. Students are bound by their university's academic honesty policy. Although policies vary by institution, North Carolina State University provides a clear definition of academic dishonesty: "Academic dishonesty is the giving, taking, or presenting of information or material by a student that unethically or fraudulently aids oneself or another on any work which is to be considered in the determination of a grade or the completion of academic requirements or the enhancement of that student's record or academic career" (NCSU 2002: n.p.). Using this definition, students violate ethical principles if they plagiarize, cheat, help someone else to cheat, fabricate data, or falsify data. The publicly available data indicate that several of Professor Schoenthaler's students committed academic dishonesty; nine students admitted to falsifying their data (Turner 2004; "Who Wants to Take" 2004). The students said that they had difficulty completing the assignment because they lacked time and money (Stapley and Cote 2004; "Students Admit Cheating" 2004; Turner 2004). Evidence suggests that the students could not use the conditions of the assignment to justify their actions; they were still responsible for violating the academic honesty policy at California State University at Stanislaus.

The Shadows of Right and Wrong

Based on the publicly available information, it appears that Professor Schoenthaler violated the ASA's ethical guidelines regarding delegation and supervision, non-exploitation, reporting on research, and public communications. In addition, the public record suggests that Professor Schoenthaler's students breached ethical guidelines regarding academic honesty. However, available information about this case leaves many unanswered questions. For instance, what was Professor Schoenthaler's motivation for supposedly breaking the ASA's ethical guidelines? Did Professor Schoenthaler

deliberately break the ASA's ethical standards? Or, was he just sloppy, unintentionally breaking ASA's ethical guidelines? Likewise, it is unclear whether Professor Schoenthaler engaged in research for unpaid academic purposes or for paid consultant purposes. The public sources do not reveal all the details and, therefore, the ethical considerations of the case are complex.

Sociology has ethical guidelines which recommend the "right" and "wrong" way of conducting research. Yet, ethical cases are not easily classified as either right or wrong. Oftentimes, ethical issues are somewhere in between: they are in the "shadows of right and wrong" (Babbie 2004: 18). Because of this, we propose that sociologists define ethics as critical thinking. According to Comstock (2006), "students should think about the social implications of their research and examine their professional codes for inconsistencies" (n.p.). Ethical guidelines are just that – guidelines. Realizing this, students need to think critically about being ethical in their research endeavors. Students should use ethical guidelines to inform, but not determine their action. Critical thinking involves asking questions, seeking advice from peers and mentors, consulting the published literature, and reflecting about the design, goals, and methods of research.

Test Your Knowledge:

Directions: Please choose the *best* answer.

1. In sociology, ethical issues are always either right *or* wrong.
 - a. true
 - b. false

2. If defining ethics as *critical thinking*, sociologists are ethical when they _____.
 - e. breach institutional regulations
 - f. adhere to ethical guidelines
 - g. commit academic dishonesty
 - h. think critically about being ethical in their research endeavors

5. Further Ethical Questions for Discussion

- Should researchers be held accountable for “honest mistakes” in the same way as those who deliberately falsify information?
- Professor Schoenthaler’s students encountered difficulty completing the assignment. As a result, nine students admitted to falsifying survey data. Under the circumstances, is their behavior still considered academic dishonesty?
- How else could Professor Schoenthaler have delegated responsibility to his students? How could he have avoided using false data?
- If *you* had to design a class project collecting primary data, how would you *delegate responsibility*? What would you expect from your undergraduate students?
- * To what extent are *prima facie* rules²⁰ actually rules? In other words, to what extent are ethical rules true by definition? Take this case, for example. While interviewing a respondent, you witness the respondent physically abusing his or her child. Legal codes require you to report the abuse and this violates the ethical guidelines about anonymity.
- * How can educators help prevent academic dishonesty in the classroom? What strategies exist for detecting academic dishonesty?
- * What are some ways we can create an ongoing dialog about ethics in the field of sociology?

²⁰ According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2000), *prima facie* means “true, authentic, or adequate at first sight” or “evident without proof or reasoning” (n.p.).

* This is a more challenging question which encourages students to think critically about research ethics.

6. Sociology and Ethics Websites

Professional Organizations' Websites

- **The International Sociological Association (ISA)**
http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/about/isa_code_of_ethics.htm
- **The American Sociological Association (ASA)**
<http://www.asanet.org/page.wv?section=Ethics&name=Ethics>
- **Rural Sociological Society (RSS)**
<http://www.ruralsociology.org/member/about.html>
- **The Midwest Sociological Society (MSS)**
http://www.themss.org/BylawsPandPNotesMinutesArchive/MSS_Bylaws_rev_Nov_2005.pdf
- **The Eastern Sociological Society (ESS)**
<http://www.essnet.org/>
- **The Pacific Sociological Association (PSS)**
http://www.pacificsoc.org/2005/06/constitution_of.html
- **The North Central Sociological Association (NCSA)**
<http://www.ncsanet.org/CodeofEthicsFinal.pdf>
- **The Southwestern Sociological Association (SSA)**
<http://www.swsociology.org/SSA%20Constitution,%20revised%2025Mar2005.htm>
- **The Mid-South Sociological Association (MSA)**
<http://www.midsouthsoc.org/ethics.htm>
- **The Southern Sociological Society (SSS)**
<http://www.msstate.edu/org/sss/bylaws/bylaws.htm>

Other Important Websites

- **NCSU Institutional Review Board**
<http://www.ncsu.edu/sparcs/IRB/>
- **United States Department of Health and Human Services:**
Office for Human Research Protection
<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/>
- **National Science Foundation:**
Interpreting the Common Rule for the Protection of Human Subjects for Behavioral and Social Science Research
<http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/hsfaqs.jsp>

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