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"Can You Handle the Truth?"

"Journal of Empirical Research on Human Subjects"

Joan E. Sieber, Editor-in-Chief, Volume 1, Number 1, March 2006, 80 pages, University of California Press, 80 pages, \$60.00/year

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

The Journal of Empirical Research on Human Subjects (JERHRE) publishes empirical research and reviews of empirical literature on human research ethics, and methodological articles about how to conduct empirical research. Traditionally, the field of bioethics – and ethics in general – is prone to theoretical "I think it, therefore it is" articles, so JERHRE is welcome arrival.

The first issue, which is free online, contains three important articles:

- "Informed Consent in International Health Research" draws on 115 articles and other publications to explore cultural and social factors underlying informed consent for health research in international settings. The article identifies important themes, crafts conclusions, and makes recommendations based on fascinating information in the articles. For example, in many African languages, there is no word for "research" or "science." Try avoiding the therapeutic misconception in a culture without those concepts. Try explaining risk probabilities to people – including many in the U.S. – who do not understand even basic statistical concepts. (Many people apparently do not understand probabilities in television weather predictions: "It's going to rain or it's not going to rain; how can it rain 30%?") In some cultures, wives require spousal consent to participate in a study, and it may be the husband (or tribal leader) who makes the informed consent decision based on factors that have little to do with the welfare of the subject.
- "Scientists' Perceptions of Organizational Justice and Self-Reported Misbehaviors" reports that scientists, when they believe they are being treated unfairly, are more likely to behave in ways that compromise the integrity of the science. So there! Scientists who believe their careers are vulnerable because, for example, they are untenured, are more likely to misbehave. The most-common misbehaviors are "overlooking others' use of flawed data or questionable interpretation of data," "changing the design, methodology or results of a study in response to pressure from a funding source," "circumventing certain minor aspects of human-subjects requirements (e.g., related to informed consent, confidentiality, etc.)," and "failing to present data that contradict one's own previous research." Mid-career scientists are twice as likely as early-career scientists to change the design, methodology or results of a study due to funding pressures. Apparently, idealism is the province of youth.
- "What Scientists Want from Their Research Ethics Committee" reveals that scientists place high value on fairness and respectful consideration. In other words, scientists want to be treated as if they are human beings, with common courtesy, or what ethicists call "interactional justice." Seriously, the authors tested 45 criteria, confirming and disproving numerous hypotheses. The fact that 910 of 1,000 surveys were returned indicates the importance of this topic to the scientific community, the quality of the survey instrument, and the respect in which the authors are held.

JERHRE is an academic journal, so the articles are written in academic style. That said, they are written clearly, with a minimum of jargon and torment of the common tongue.

JERHRE is available at <http://caliber.ucpress.net/loi/jer>. Details about JERHRE are available at <http://www.csueastbay.edu/JERHRE/>.

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