

To: APSA Governing Council
From: David A. Lake, President
RE: Charge to the ad hoc Committee on Human Subjects Research

The Ad Hoc Committee on Human Subjects will review and potentially propose new language for the *APSA Guide to Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms*, Section H (currently pp.27-28 of the “Guide”). The object is to identify broad principles of ethics relating to research on human subjects that can guide individual scholars in the design and practice of their research, inform institutional review boards about current standards and practices in Political Science research, and possibly form the basis for Association standards in areas of broad-based agreement. Although researchers interact with human subjects in different ways using different methodologies, the ad hoc committee will focus on broad principles that span the discipline of political science. Where strong agreement exists among practitioners of certain methods about ethical practices, the committee may seek to make specific recommendations. Any recommendations of the ad hoc committee will be reviewed by the APSA Governing Council for possible adoption in the Guide.

Proposed Membership

Scott Desposato (University of California, San Diego), Co-Chair
Trisha Phillips (University of West Virginia), Co-Chair
Matthew Barreto (University of California, Los Angeles)
Cathrine Boone (London School of Economics and Political Science)
Eric Dickson (New York University)
Macartan Humphries (Columbia University)
Rose McDermott (Brown University)
Layna Mosley (University of North Carolina)
Daniel Neilson (Brigham Young University)
Peregine Schwartz-Shea (University of Utah)
Susan Thomson (Colgate College)
Elizabeth Wood (Yale University)

Current Guidelines on Human Subjects Research

Section H of the Guide currently reads, in its entirety:

34. The methodology of political science includes procedures which involve human subjects: surveys and interviews, observation of public behavior, experiments, physiological testing, and examination of documents. Possible risk to human subjects is something that political scientists should take into account. Under certain conditions, political scientists are also legally required to assess the risks to human subjects.

34.1 A common Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects became effective on August 19, 1991, adopted by 15 major federal departments and agencies including the National Science Foundation (45 CFR Part 690) and the Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46). The Policy has been promulgated concurrently by regulation in each department and agency. While the federal policy applies only to research subject to regulation by the federal departments and agencies involved,

universities can be expected to extend the policy to all research involving human subjects.

Proposed Agenda of the Committee

The committee will review and potentially comment on practices that engage human beings as research subjects, across the panoply of methodologies used in the discipline, including interviews, surveys, oral histories, participant observation and ethnography, laboratory and field experiments and, where applicable, use of data sets. The committee should also be sensitive to research practices that may have (intended or unintended) effects on “bystanders” who are not themselves research subjects.

The Department of Health and Human Services is currently revising its rules for human subjects research (“the Common Rule”). The new rules are expected to be released by the end of this year, though the draft rules are contentious and under dispute (most notably by the National Academies). Principles and practices proposed by the ad hoc committee will be assessed against the Common Rule, as revised. The ad hoc committee recommendations may contest the revised rules, as consistent with academic freedom, or may be more restrictive than the revised rules, as appropriate. In all cases, the ad hoc committee should be attentive to how the Common Rule should be applied in the research principles and practices of our particular discipline and to the individual researcher’s right of freedom of conscience and to democratic dissent.

Among the issues the committee will discuss are:

- 1) **Informed consent:** when is it appropriate or required for researchers to inform subjects about the nature of their participation in a research project? When is written documentation required?
- 2) **Deception and covert research:** when is it permissible or appropriate for researchers to conduct research covertly and / or to deceive subjects about the nature of their participation in a research project? If deception/covertness is required, do researchers have an obligation to disclose to subjects the actual nature of their participation and, if so, when and under what circumstances?
- 3) **Security of research subjects:** what responsibilities do researchers have for the safety and security of their research subjects, including physical harm, emotional harm, and third party harms, and other costs associated with participation? Conversely, are there harms when particular kinds of subjects and/or topics are not studied?
- 4) **Confidentiality:** what obligations does a researcher have to maintain the confidentiality of human sources? Are there permissible breaches of confidentiality, say, involving the discovery of illegal activities? Must researchers “scrub” datasets of potentially identifying information even if unknown to the researcher (increasingly a possibility in “big” consumer-based datasets)? What should a researcher do if individuals request that they be identified as in, say, oral histories?
- 5) **Trauma:** when research subjects may experience emotional responses (“triggers”) to sensitive materials or questions, what responsibilities does the researcher have to ensure appropriate care and follow-up? Concern with possible trauma may be “obvious” in cases of war or sexual

violence, but trauma may be experienced or re-experienced in a wide variety of settings. Although it may not be possible to anticipate all responses by all subjects, what reasonable care and foresight is required or consistent with ethical standards in Political Science?

6) **Participant/observation:** researchers are sometimes required to participate in events and practices being studied. Are there ethical obligations particular to ethnographic research where researchers are “embedded” in communities?

7) **Impact:** when the research process itself may affect real world political systems and outcomes in significant ways, such as the outcomes of elections or individual attitudes and actions, when is the intervention justified? What guidelines might be used to assess the ethics of the intervention? For instance, should research be restricted to the minimum necessary “power” (i.e., minimum number of subjects necessary to identify the expected effect)? If the minimum necessary power required might be sufficient to alter the results of some political event/process, is special justification necessary (i.e., the knowledge gained by the research is sufficiently important to warrant the possible impact)? How might such special justifications be determined?

8) **Security of researchers and assistants:** what responsibilities do researchers have for the safety, security and emotional health of themselves, employees/contract workers, or students (regardless of research setting)? As with trauma to research subjects above, the security of researchers goes beyond the obvious wartime or violent settings to include possible emotional harm triggered by sensitive material and questions. How can the academic freedom of the individual researcher be protected even as security concerns are addressed?

9) **Institutional Review Boards:** What is the relationship between our professional standards and IRB rules and practices? IRBs vary somewhat across campuses and universities in the United States in their assessments of social science research. This may change under the new Common Rule. What standards should be employed when research is conducted by scholars outside the United States without the benefit of IRB review or its equivalent? What standards should be applied when researchers are conducting research in a foreign country with local review and permitting requirements? Can research be published in our association journals that has not received IRB or equivalent approval?

10) **Responsibilities of Faculty Advisors:** At many research institutions, graduate students and professional staff cannot serve as principal investigators and, as a result, faculty supervisors serve in that role. What responsibilities do supervisors have for ensuring research meets professional ethical standards?

11) **Public Officials exemption:** Should research on public officials be exempt from any and all of the above? Who is a public official? Note that this is one area where the Common Rule, currently exempting public officials from IRB rules, is likely to be revised.

12) **How are ethical standards to be applied?** Where does responsibility reside for ensuring ethical standards are met within our research? At the level of the researcher (self-certification)? Editors of journals publishing research output? The APSA itself? If the Association adopts a set of ethical guidelines, what responsibilities does it have for addressing questions, advising researchers, reviewing studies, etc.?

13) Should graduate programs be expected to provide **ethics training** to graduate students? Should continuing faculty/researchers be expected to complete ethics training? Should the APSA offer learning modules and other resources beyond, perhaps, a more complete guide to professional ethics?