

Report of the APSA Ad-Hoc Committee on Human Subjects Research
February 8, 2019

The APSA Ad-Hoc Committee on Human Subjects Research is pleased to present the following report in response to its charge.

Recommendations

The committee unanimously recommends that APSA:

Adopt the proposed *Principles of Ethics for Human Subjects Research* for inclusion in the *APSA Guide to Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms* (see Appendix A: Proposed Ethical Principles).

Adopt the proposed *Principles of Ethics for Human Subjects Research and Guidance* as a resource supporting and clarifying the *Principles* to be made available online to membership. (see Appendix B: *Proposed Principles of Ethics for Human Subjects Research and Guidance*).

Charge a standing committee with the responsibility of reviewing the *Principles* and *Guidance* as needed, reporting any recommended revisions or expansions to APSA Council; place the *Principles* and *Guidance* document on APSA website; and develop a repository for literature, case studies, syllabi, and other documents.

Background and Process

The current APSA Ethics Guide provides the following statement on Principles Governing Research on Human Subjects:

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.

Given the diversity of research topics, methodologies, and settings in political science research, the existing principles do not provide guidance for many ethical issues that political scientists may face.

Recognizing the limitations of the current language, in the fall of 2016, APSA President David Lake proposed the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee on Human Subjects Research to “review and potentially propose new language for the *APSA Guide to Professional Ethics, Rights and Freedoms*.” APSA Council approved the formation of this committee and charged it with identifying broad principles of ethics to guide scholars and which could possibly form the basis for new Association standards. The committee’s charge included 13 specific issues for the committee to consider. (See Appendix C for a copy of the complete charge).

Eleven political scientists participated the committee, which was co-chaired by Scott Desposato (University of California, San Diego) and Trisha Phillips (West Virginia University). The committee membership reflects the diversity of the discipline in terms of substantive research and methodological approaches. The additional members of the committee¹ were:

Matthew Barreto (University of California, Los Angeles)
Catherine Boone (London School of Economics and Political Science)
Macartan Humphreys (Columbia University)
Rose McDermott (Brown University)
Layna Mosley (University of North Carolina)
Daniel Nielson (Brigham Young University)
Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (University of Utah)
Susan Thomson (Colgate University)
Elisabeth Wood (Yale University)

The committee began its work in Spring 2017 when we formed thematic subcommittees and each took responsibility for examining related charge items. The subcommittees were: (1) Autonomy (Charge items 1 and 2); (2) Harm (Charge items 3, 4, 5, and 7); (3) Scope (Charge items 6, 9, and 11); and (4) Oversight and Training (Charge items 10, 12, and 13). During Summer 2017, the subcommittees began their discussions, identified the numerous embedded issues in each charge item, and sketched the ethical and practical landscape.

The committee met in person for the first time in San Francisco, on the day before the APSA Annual Meeting in 2017. At this meeting, we discussed a number of general issues related to our charge, engaged a guest speaker from anthropology (Dr. Dena Plemmons), heard progress reports from each subcommittee, and established a work plan and schedule.

During academic year 2017-2018, the subcommittees reviewed the relevant literature, explored the issues and positions raised at our APSA meeting, and prepared reports with proposed

¹ A twelfth member, Eric Dickson, was appointed to the committee but withdrew before the committee began its work.

general positions on each of their charge items. In Summer 2018, these reports were circulated throughout the committee and assigned reviewers.

Also during this period the committee engaged in a series of outreach efforts to inform membership about our efforts and to promote engagement and input. In Spring 2018, with the help of APSA staff, we developed a website and issued a press release that was sent to APSA membership and mentioned in the APSA newsletter (Appendix D). Additionally, co-chairs Desposato and Phillips hosted a roundtable panel at Midwest in 2018 to share information and solicit input. During the same period, the committee conducted a survey of APSA's membership to assess the appropriate role of an Ethics Guide. An executive summary of that survey is attached (Appendix E). In both the survey and the press release, we publicized our website where the public could review our charge, see the committee membership, and submit comments: <https://connect.apsanet.org/hsr/>

The committee reconvened in Boston for a two-day meeting immediately before the APSA 2018 Annual Meeting. The committee discussed each of the subcommittee reports and sought consensus positions on each of the charge items.

During the fall of 2018, the subcommittees and the committee co-chairs revised the subcommittee reports, extracting a set of agreed-upon principles for political scientists and text for a guidance document which expands on each of the principles and discusses definitions, nuance, exceptions, and scope. A complete draft of principles and guidance was circulated to the committee, and several rounds of discussions and revisions began.

On February 7, 2019, the committee voted unanimously to approve the principles and to approve the guidance that are included with this document, and to recommend that they be included as part of the APSA Ethics Guide. The committee also voted on two additional recommendations, discussed below.

Principles and Guidance

The primary deliverables of the committee are two documents. The first is the "*Principles of Ethics for Human Subjects Research*", henceforth, "Principles". The second is the "*Principles of Ethics for Human Subjects Research and Guidance*", henceforth, "Guidance".

The first document, *Principles*, offers general directives to guide scholars in their dealings with research participants. *Principles* addresses each of the charge items, although the organization is not identical (For example, note that Harm and Trauma, charge items 4 and 5, are addressed in principles 7 and 8.). In addition, the committee identified three broader principles which emerged from our discussion, which are included as principles 1, 2, and 3.

Guidance expands on the principles and offers definitions, clarifications, and considerations for researchers. The committee views *Guidance* as a living document that should be regularly

updated as new issues and cases emerge. One of our recommendations is that a standing committee be assigned to review and suggest revisions as needed.

Recommendations

The primary recommendations are that APSA Council adopt the proposed language, incorporating proposed *Principles* into the *APSA Guide to Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms*, and that APSA Council adopt the *Guidance* as a resource supporting and clarifying *Principles*, after review and input from membership.

Additionally, the committee recommends that a standing committee be assigned the task of reviewing the *Principles* and *Guidance* and proposing revisions to Council as needed. We suggest that this task be assigned to the Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms. Both the *Principles* and *Guidance* should evolve as scholars identify shortcomings in the documents we have prepared, encounter new issues, and converge on consensus positions on other issues.

We also recommend that APSA place the *Guidance* document on its website, and develop a repository for literature, case studies, syllabi, and other documents that can be a resource for scholars, departments, other disciplines, and other institutions.

The committee sees all of these activities as an important part of supporting ethical research.

A minority of the committee also supports the following recommendation:

APSA should conduct a full membership vote on the adoption of these principles.

Issues for Future Consideration

The committee identified a number of issues which were not addressed in the charge, but which at least some committee members felt deserve consideration and attention. We note these issues for Council's consideration in future revisions.

1. Research conducted in partnership with third party actors

The committee acknowledges that a researcher's ethical responsibility and accountability for a study can change when collaborating with third parties but sees complications that deserve additional study. The committee's recommendations regarding partnerships emphasize responsibility, transparency, and disclosure (See guidance for Principle 11). Future recommendations should examine these relationships and boundaries with the idea that partnership with third parties do not always fully absolve researchers of responsibility for the ethicality of the research.

2. Definitions for minimal harm, direct and indirect harm

Some members of the committee felt that the principles and guidance will eventually benefit from definitions for these and other important concepts. Future revisions should capture and codify these definitions.

3. Benefit and risk/benefit ratios

One important ethical issue that the committee did not address is the notion that political science research should provide benefit, and the risks associated with political science research should be offset by benefit. These issues could be addressed in future reviews and revisions.

4. Justice, exploitation, and obligations to give back

A potential principle for future consideration is the obligation to treat participants and host communities fairly and justly. This includes, among other things, the idea of “giving back”. Several committee members noted that research participants rarely are briefed on the knowledge acquired through the research. Additional consideration of obligations to participants and participant communities is recommended.

5. Individual, Collective, and Aggregate Harm

Most considerations of harm in human subjects research emphasize harm to an individual. However, political science research raises several issues of broader harms to groups, organizations, or systems that are only partly covered by our charge (see Principle 11). Some on the committee would like additional investigation of responsibilities of researchers to consider collective, group, and aggregate autonomy and harm.

6. Confidentiality, FOIA, and Subpoena

Freedom of Information Act requests and Subpoenas can threaten confidentiality and pose harm to research participants, especially in certain research areas (i.e., studying activists). For example, the Boston College case in which archivists were subpoenaed is especially concerning given the increased emphasis on archiving data. Some members of the committee felt that the current language in the *Guide* (6.8) should be reviewed in light of current literature (see, for example, Kahn 2018).

7. Introduction for *Guidance*

Some members of the committee would like an introductory section to the *Guidance* describing political science research and explaining the purpose and intended use of the principles and guidance.

Confidentiality

The committee decided at its first meeting to make all internal discussions confidential to promote frank and open conversation about issues, positions, and principles.

Appendices

- A. Principles of Ethics for Human Subjects Research
- B. Principles of Ethics for Human Subjects Research and Guidance
- C. APSA Council's charge to the committee
- D. Executive Summary of the survey of membership
- E. Press release regarding the Committee

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