

## AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE

*Science* serves its readers as a forum for the presentation and discussion of important issues related to the advancement of science, including the presentation of minority or conflicting points of view, rather than by publishing only material on which a consensus has been reached. Accordingly, all articles published in *Science*—including editorials, news and comment, and book reviews—are signed and reflect the individual views of the authors and not official points of view adopted by the AAAS or the institutions with which the authors are affiliated.

### Editorial Board

1980: RICHARD E. BALZHISER, WALLACE S. BROECKER, CLEMENT L. MARKERT, FRANK W. PUTNAM, BRYANT W. ROSSITER, VERA C. RUBIN, MAXINE F. SINGER, PAUL E. WAGGONER, F. KARL WILLENBROCK

1981: PETER BELL, BRYCE CRAWFORD, JR., E. PETER GEIDUSCHEK, EMIL W. HAURY, SALLY GREGORY KOHLSTEDT, MANCUR OLSON, PETER H. RAVEN, WILLIAM P. SLICHTER, FREDERIC G. WORDEN

### Publisher

WILLIAM D. CAREY

### Editor

PHILIP H. ABELSON

### Editorial Staff

#### Managing Editor

ROBERT V. ORMES

#### Assistant Managing Editor

JOHN E. RINGLE

#### News Editor: BARBARA J. CULLITON

*News and Comment:* WILLIAM J. BROAD, LUTHER J. CARTER, CONSTANCE HOLDEN, ELIOT MARSHALL, DEBORAH SHAPLEY, R. JEFFREY SMITH, NICHOLAS WADE, JOHN WALSH. *Editorial Assistant:* SCHERRAINE MACK

*Research News:* BEVERLY KARPLUS HARTLINE, RICHARD A. KERR, GINA BARI KOLATA, JEAN L. MARX, THOMAS H. MAUGH II, ARTHUR L. ROBINSON. *Editorial Assistant:* FANNIE GROOM

#### Consulting Editor: ALLEN L. HAMMOND

*Associate Editors:* ELEANORE BUTZ, MARY DORFMAN, SYLVIA EBERHART, RUTH KULSTAD

*Assistant Editors:* CAITILIN GORDON, STEPHEN KEPPEL, LOIS SCHMITT

*Book Reviews:* KATHERINE LIVINGSTON, *Editor:* LINDA HEISERMAN, JANET KEGG

*Letters:* CHRISTINE KARLIK

*Copy Editor:* ISABELLA BOULDIN

*Production:* NANCY HARTNAGEL, JOHN BAKER; YA LI SWIGART, HOLLY BISHOP, ELEANOR WARNER; MARY McDANIEL, JEAN ROCKWOOD, LEAH RYAN, SHARON RYAN

*Covers, Reprints, and Permissions:* GRAYCE FINGER, *Editor:* CORRINE HARRIS, MARGARET LLOYD

*Guide to Scientific Instruments:* RICHARD G. SOMMER  
*Assistant to the Editors:* JACK R. ALSIP

#### Membership Recruitment: GWENDOLYN HUDDLE

*Member and Subscription Records:* ANN RAGLAND

EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Area code 202. General Editorial Office, 467-4350; Book Reviews, 467-4367; Guide to Scientific Instruments, 467-4480; News and Comment, 467-4430; Reprints and Permissions, 467-4483; Research News, 467-4321. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. For "Instructions for Contributors," write the editorial office or see page xi, *Science*, 28 March 1980.

BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE: Area Code 202. Membership and Subscriptions: 467-4417.

### Advertising Representatives

*Director:* EARL J. SCHERAGO

*Production Manager:* GINA REILLY

*Advertising Sales Manager:* RICHARD L. CHARLES

*Marketing Manager:* HERBERT L. BURKLUND

Sales: NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036: Steve Hamburger, 1515 Broadway (212-730-1050); SCOTCH PLAINS, N.J. 07076: C. Richard Callis, 12 Unami Lane (201-889-4873); CHICAGO, ILL. 60611: Jack Ryan, Room 2107, 919 N. Michigan Ave. (312-337-4973); BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF. 90211: Winn Nance, 111 N. La Cienega Blvd. (213-657-2772); DORSET, VT. 05251: Fred W. Dieffenbach, Kent Hill Rd. (802-867-5581).

ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Tenth floor, 1515 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-730-1050.

## Regulation of Social Research

At the dawn of federal regulation of use of human subjects in research, Preston Burnham\* wrote that he might someday "mark 1966 as the year in which all medical progress ceased." Thus far he has proved a poor prognosticator. Gray and Cooke† recently reported that just over half of 2000 researchers questioned about their views on institutional review boards (IRB's) said that benefits of the review process outweighed difficulties, although nearly half also said that "their research had been impeded in a way that was not balanced by benefits." Burnham's forebodings may yet be prescient, but for research in social science.

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) has proposed regulations that would extend the requirement for prior approval by an IRB to research in any field, HEW-funded or not, that involves collection of information about identifiable persons, living or dead.‡ A political scientist collating *New York Times* stories about individual politicians, a sociologist studying sports, a statistician intent on identifying the authors of the Federalist papers could not proceed without an IRB's consent. A defender of the proposed regulations might say that they would not be applied in such instances, but if that is true then they should be stated so that such cases fall outside their bounds. The regulations clearly require "prior and continuing review and approval by an Institutional Review Board" in these examples.

Harms risked by human subjects of research range from the possibility of sudden death to that of faint embarrassment. No single mechanism can be optimal for all situations. Government intervention should be closely tied to the reality of the risk and to the protection needed. At present, we have little hard data establishing the incidence of harm, let alone its nature or the circumstances in which it occurs. A systematic study of incidence, to date, is appended to the 1978 Report of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. Interviews revealed "harmful effects" in 79 of 2384 projects surveyed, and these were found to be generally "trivial or only temporarily disabling," although in some medical investigations deaths were reported. For the social sciences, only anecdotes suggest the need for special protection in some situations, but when and what kind of protection are far from clear.

The common ethical problems within social research differ from those in biomedical experiments even as those within biomedicine differ from field to field. In social psychology, there is often a question of use of deception; in documentary research, the question of privacy of records arises; in interview research, the major problem is protecting confidences. These require different solutions. Since hospitals and clinics are legally responsible to their patients, some form of institutional peer review of studies of patients seems reasonable. The same procedure may be inappropriate for interviews or for library research. Indeed, clearing procedures with a review board makes it harder, not easier, for a scholar to protect confidences.

The major professional and university associations, led by the American Council on Education, have urged HEW to abandon its dragnet approach. Instead of prior review of all research involving human subjects (minus a list of specific exceptions), the associations urge that review be limited to significant risks of harm—that is, to research that involves intrusion on a subject's person, deprives subjects of resources, or deceives them.

In research, as in other walks of life, risk exists in interactions that consist of nothing more than open exchange of information. The HEW proposal for protection—by imposing restrictions on who may speak to whom—threatens the freedom of scientist and layman alike. As the Federalist papers argued in regard to a similar proposal to solve a problem by restricting liberty, "it could never be more truly said than of the . . . remedy, that it is worse than the disease."—FREDERICK MOSTELLER, *President, AAAS*

\*P. J. Burnham, *Science*, 22 April 1966, p. 448. †B. Gray and R. A. Cooke, *Hastings Center Report*, February 1980, p. 36. ‡*Federal Register*, 14 August 1979.

# Science

## Regulation of social research

F Mosteller

*Science* **208** (4449), 1219.  
DOI: 10.1126/science.11643598

### ARTICLE TOOLS

<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/208/4449/1219.citation>

### PERMISSIONS

<http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of this article is subject to the [Terms of Service](#)

---

*Science* (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. 2017 © The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science. No claim to original U.S. Government Works. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.