

BUILDING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH CAPACITY

Research Integrity and Responsible Conduct of Research

ANN NICHOLS-CASEBOLT



OXFORD

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND RESPONSIBLE CONDUCT OF RESEARCH

Building Social Work Research Capacity

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Acknowledgments

My interest in the topic of responsible conduct of research grew out of many years serving as chairperson of the social-behavioral IRB panel at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). However, it was seeing the passion and commitment of Dr. Francis Macrina to the training of students and faculty on issues of research integrity that expanded my view of RCR and encouraged me to consider what “responsible conduct” means in the context of research carried out by social workers. Frank, the vice president for research at VCU, has been a leader in the area of RCR education for biomedical researchers, and his knowledge, as well as his book *Scientific Integrity*, were invaluable resources for this handbook.

This handbook also benefited from the contributions of several others. I want to thank my colleagues in the School of Social Work at VCU: Dr. Kia Bentley, Dr. Holly Matto, Dr. Ellen Netting, and Dr. Mary Katherine O’Connor, who took the time to provide insightful comments and suggestions on drafts of various chapters. Additionally, Landon Holbrook, Jennifer Keast, Kelly Lockeman, Andrea Molzhon, and Nicholas Pullen, graduate students in the RCR course I taught as part of VCU’s Preparing Future Faculty program, merit thanks for their generosity in allowing me to use and adapt case studies they wrote for the course.

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While IASWR closed its doors in 2009, it was under Joan's leadership and the auspices of the organization that this handbook and others in the series were conceived and launched. May it become a part of the legacy of IASWR's work on behalf of social work research.

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND RESPONSIBLE CONDUCT OF RESEARCH

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Research Integrity and the Responsible Conduct of Research

Rodney has been conducting an evaluation of a long-standing program to reduce youth violence that has been implemented by a small not-for-profit local agency. The program is well-liked by both the agency board and the families in the low-income Hispanic neighborhood it serves. Unfortunately, the evaluation findings show that the program has no significant effects. Rodney has just discussed the findings with the agency director, who has asked that he not make them public. The director explains that publishing the findings will jeopardize the funding of the program, causing several staff members to lose their jobs and potentially undermining the reputation and overall work of the agency in this underserved community. Rodney does not want to deprive the agency of funding or damage its reputation, nor does he want to ruin his relationship with this agency. On the other hand, he wants to publish the findings from this study because he feels a responsibility to build the knowledge base regarding programs that work (and don't) in the area of violence prevention. Rodney is also concerned about dollars being directed to a program that is not achieving the desired outcomes. Rodney has come to you, as his mentor, asking for guidance in what he should do.

Research Integrity and Responsible Conduct of Research

Integrity in the conduct of research has been defined as an individual's commitment to "intellectual honesty and personal responsibility" that embraces "excellence, trustworthiness and lawfulness"

(Institute of Medicine, 2002, p. 4). Research integrity is aspirational; it is about upholding the highest standards when engaging in research, not merely avoiding wrongdoing or questionable research practices. But, like many other areas of professional practice, making decisions about the most trustworthy and responsible course of action in our practice of research is not always direct and clear. While such an act as fabricating data or results is clearly an ethical violation (and often a legal violation), there are many other instances when the right course of action is more difficult to discern. For example, what is the ethical course of action in deciding who should be listed as an author on a paper or the order of authorship? How do you ethically conduct research on your own students or clients? Or, as the case at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, how do you make a decision when there appear to be conflicting ethical choices? Rodney is faced with balancing what he perceives to be his responsibility as a researcher, to disseminate study findings, with his commitment to the agency and the community it serves. His ethical principle of doing no harm to the agency and the community is at odds with his ethical principle of enhancing and promoting practice competence. So what is the most ethical course of action for Rodney?

Although decisions such as the ones faced by Rodney may always be difficult, we are more likely to make good ethical choices when we have some grounding in the potential ethical issues that may arise for us in a research setting, and some guidance for ethical decision making. This book is designed to assist social scientists as they consider what it means to uphold the highest ethical standards in their research. It discusses what research integrity and responsible conduct of research (RCR) mean for social work, and social science disciplines more broadly. Drawing on research, curriculum models, and identified best practices that have been developed primarily for biomedical researchers, it presents practical strategies for educating and promoting RCR among social scientists across a variety of RCR domains. The chapters also include case studies that are designed to enhance critical thinking skills related to handling ethical dilemmas confronted by social scientists in the practice of research.

Although this book was written with graduate students and those beginning their research careers in mind, given the dearth of

information specific to social science research on this topic, more senior researchers will likely find new information and areas of interest. This book will also be relevant for community agency staff engaged in research and program evaluation. With the growth of community-based participatory research as well as internal agency needs, research is becoming an increasingly important activity in many community service organizations and agency staff members are often confronted with the same issues related to responsible conduct of research.

The Importance of Assuring the Responsible Conduct of Research

Articles such as “Scientists Behaving Badly” (Martinson, Anderson, & de Vries, 2005), which reported that one-third of scientists surveyed indicated they had engaged in at least one research practice that could get them into trouble, quickly makes the national headlines and shakes the public’s confidence in research. The erosion of public trust often means a decrease in people’s willingness to fund research, and, more important, their willingness to act on the findings that research might produce. The purpose of research in the social sciences is to advance knowledge of the social world and, ultimately, for a profession such as social work, use that knowledge to improve the human condition. If the public—including our practice community—distrusts research, they are likely to be reluctant to change their behavior based on the results of our research. Although most instances of misconduct in research that hit the media are those in the biomedical sciences, as the Goldring case shows (see text box), social scientists are not immune to “misbehaving.”

Amy Beth Goldring, University of California at Los Angeles:
Based on an investigation conducted by the University of
California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and additional analysis

conducted by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) in its oversight review, ORI found that Ms. Goldring, former graduate student, Department of Psychology, UCLA, engaged in scientific misconduct by falsifying or fabricating data and statistical results for up to nine pilot studies on the impact of vulnerability on decision making from Fall 2000 to Winter 2002 as a basis for her doctoral thesis research. The falsified or fabricated data was included in a manuscript submitted to Psychological Science, in National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH), National Institutes of Health (NIH), grant application 1 R01 MH65238 01A1, and in NIMH, NIH, pre-doctoral training grant T32 MH15750. (Case Summaries, 2006)

Until recently, issues related to the responsible practice of research had not been the subject of much discussion in social work. As has been argued by Gibelman and Gelman (2001), this was in large measure due to the profession's historical lack of emphasis on research and the fact that few researchers sought federal funding for their projects. However, this is changing as more and more schools of social work are stressing the importance of extramural funding. One indicator of this change is the growth in the number of social workers who have received research grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Data from a report compiled by the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) found that in 1993, there were 38 NIH grants to social work investigators, by 2000 the total number had grown to 97, and as of September 2009, 680 grants had been funded by the NIH for social work investigators (IASWR, 2009).

The increasing emphasis on scholarship and research in the profession, along with growth in the social work research portfolio, creates many more situations in which issues of research integrity are likely to arise. These situations can range from the potential conflicts of interest that may arise when evaluating one's own practice,

to authorship issues on multidisciplinary projects or those involving students, to data security of electronic data bases. Without grounding in what makes for the responsible practice of research, inadvertent “bad behavior” might well occur. But who decides what is responsible practice of research, and how are the “rules” established? Unfortunately, there is no single code or set of rules that clearly sets out, across all domains, what should be done, when, and in what situations. There are federal regulations and institutional policies to protect human subjects, and publication guidelines established by professional journals and/or professional societies, but other areas may depend much more on an individual’s personal or professional codes of conduct.

Responsible Conduct of Research

No one is likely to dispute the notion that researchers should act in an ethical and responsible manner, but what exactly does that mean? Most agree that at a minimum, the researcher will not falsify data or steal others’ work and will adequately protect research participants. However, research integrity and the responsible conduct of research go well beyond this. Being an ethical and responsible researcher requires adhering to appropriate standards of behavior in all aspects of the research process, ranging from potential conflicts of interest to publication practices. The federal Office of Research Integrity (ORI), which has the responsibility for monitoring “institutional investigations of research misconduct and facilitates the responsible conduct of research (RCR) through educational, preventive, and regulatory activities” (<http://ori.hhs.gov/>), has identified several domains they consider essential to responsible conduct of research:

- *Research misconduct.* This domain relates to deliberate falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism in the proposing, conducting, or disseminating of research. It is behavior that is defined by federal regulations, and all universities that receive federal

research dollars must have policies in place for reporting and handling cases of potential research misconduct.

- *Mentor/trainee responsibilities.* This domain recognizes that mentoring is important to training in the responsible conduct of research and fostering a climate that promotes ethical behavior. How well a mentor performs the more general activities of mentoring is related to protégé outcomes, including the protégé's own behavior in acting responsibly in the conduct of research.
- *Conflict of interest and commitment.* Conflicts that have the potential to compromise or bias professional judgment in research projects can range from financial interests to personal beliefs. Managing these conflicts becomes critical to being a responsible researcher.
- *Collaborative science.* The need for interdisciplinary collaborations to solve complex problems raises additional issues and concerns that can impact the conduct of research. These can range from who is responsible for the project to who owns the data and publication rights.
- *Research subjects protection.* This is another domain guided by federal regulations and university policies and procedures. It recognizes that ethically responsible research requires adequate protection of research participants.
- *Data acquisition, management, sharing, and ownership.* The management of research data includes how one collects, stores, protects, and shares data. Poor data management puts the researcher at risk for questions about the veracity of his/her findings and can jeopardize the privacy of the subjects from whom the data were collected.
- *Publication practices, peer review, and responsible authorship.* This domain includes issues encompassing ethical reporting of findings, authorship credit, and peer review. Dissemination of research findings is an essential part of the research endeavor, thus it is important we ensure the integrity of the process.

In 2007, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) took a first step in establishing guidance for social workers in this area by