

## Ethical Issues in Social Science Research

From *Aging with grace: What the Nun Study teaches us...*”

[The researcher has just been given approval to study cognitive and physical correlates of dementia with nuns from of the Sisters of Notre Dame by Sister Carmen, a leader of the order. Sister Carmen is instructing the researcher.]

“No matter what you do, I want you to remember who these women are. They are real people. Very dear to us. They are holy people, too. I don’t want you to treat them as research subjects. Get to know them. Understand that many of the older sisters were the teachers or mentors of the younger sisters, and we treat them with the care and respect they deserve. We will expect nothing less from you.”<sup>1</sup> (p. 15)

### I. More Fun with Independent and Dependent Variables

*Name the Independent Variable, the Dependent Variable, and possible attributes of each implied in the scenario. (Hint about attributes—the attributes of a variable will indicate how the variable will be operationalized, or defined for measurement.)*

1. *Example* “Does developing behavioral contracts with school-age children diagnosed with ADHD result in improved school performance?”

IV Developing behavioral contracts Attributes Did or did not develop behavioral contract

DV Improved school performance Attributes Test grade (A, B, C, D, F)

2. “Does the extent of depression in young children predict later school performance problems?”

IV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

DV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> Snowdon, D. (2001). *Aging with grace: What the Nun Study teaches us about leading longer, healthier, and more meaningful lives*. New York: Bantam Books.

3. “Can Cognitive Behavioral Therapy reduce conflict for parents in couples counseling?”

IV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

DV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

4. “It is hypothesized that income, level of education, and level of family support reduce re-offending of those who committed a first offense.”

IV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

DV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

5. “For every one point increase in the Cohen Self Esteem Scale, the civic involvement of adolescents also increases.

IV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

DV \_\_\_\_\_ Attributes \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*For questions 1 and 3, do you notice a pattern about the independent variable? (Hint—it has something to do with evaluative research.)

\*\*Answer: In evaluative research, the most important independent variable has to do with the \_\_\_\_\_.

## II. Ethical Issues in Social Science Research

### B. Students' reports:

1. Why is it important to protect research subjects? What areas need protecting?

2. What is the difference between “confidentiality” and “anonymity”?

C. What is “Human Subjects Review”? What is an “IRB”?

D. The role of research ethics in the Transcultural context

Student report: What is “culturally competent measurement” in research? Relate this to one or more (of the 5) areas of the Transcultural Perspective.

E. Controversy and SW research. Group discussion: Can you think of ways that your role as a researcher might conflict with your own personal values?

F. Power and oppression, and research with vulnerable populations

G. Sample Informed Consent

H. *For your final paper you will be required to address the issues of protecting human subjects and informed consent*

III. The Research Process (very similar to the structure of a research report)

A. Problem formulation

1. Identifying interest area as topic. “This research examines...”
2. Why is this research important? And relevance to social work
3. Purpose of the research
  - a. Exploratory vs.
  - b. Descriptive vs.
  - c. Explanatory (or Evaluative) research
4. The research question(s) and hypothesis(es)

B. Literature review.

1. Purposes? (Student report: In a research report, why is the literature review important (or, what purposes does it serve)?
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. \_\_\_\_\_
2. How to start a lit review—keyword searches

C. Methods—a description of who, what, where, how?

1. Research design--overall structure of the research—e.g. group comparison designs (experimental, quasi-experimental, pre-experimental), single case design, etc. Research design is tied to the main purpose of your research—exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory/evaluative.
2. Sample and sampling procedure—what is your target population (to whom will your

findings be generalized)? How will participants get recruited and selected to be included in your study?

3. Study site—where the research will take place (often an agency or geographic locale)
4. Variables and measurement and/or Themes—how will the variables be defined (operationalized)? How will they be measured? For qualitative research, what are the main categories of themes and what is their source?
5. Human subjects considerations and plan
6. Procedures (such as description of intervention if you are evaluating one) as well as data collection strategies, such as surveys, interviews, secondary data, narrative texts (**Note—you *won't* be collecting data until next year for your 298 project.**)
7. Study design limitations—each study has its flaws! What are those for your study, such as threats to your study's validity?
8. Analysis plan—how will you analyze and interpret the data? (**Covered in 242**)

D. Analyzing data and interpreting findings (**Covered in 242**)

E. Discussing and interpreting findings (**Note—Covered in 242**)

1. Did this study answer your questions or meet your objectives?
2. Implications for social work practice & policy
3. Implications in the context of the Transcultural Perspective

#### IV. Small Group Exercise

For each scenario:

- What is the problem being addressed?
- Identify the research statement. (“This research examines...,is focused on..., deals with..., addresses... \_\_\_\_\_.”)
- Identify the independent and dependent variables
- State a research question
- State one or more hypotheses
- Diagram your model

**Scenario 1:** You are interested in what factors cause the symptoms of people diagnosed with mental illness to become worse. You have access to data about their perceived level of symptom distress, a recent measure of stress level, current level of family support, whether or not they are in treatment, and the number of social contact they have.

**Scenario 2:** You work for an agency that provides support groups for victims of domestic violence in local shelters. One of the objectives of the groups is to help clients feel more in

control of their lives. You wonder whether or not they are effective in that way.

**Scenario 3:** Caseworkers are required to have regular contacts with children who have been removed from parental custody. An agency report shows that some children seem to have more contacts than others. You wonder what factors explain this. (**Note: for this scenario—also identify the independent variables that might be relevant**)

V. Clarification about Written Assignment #1

A. More on research questions and hypotheses.

1. What does “answerable question” mean? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Reminder: hypotheses are for explanatory/evaluative research topics only. For descriptive research (e.g. understanding the characteristics of a population, rates of occurrence of something, etc.) you only need a research question.
3. How many research questions do I need? At least one, and not more than three.

B. Status reports on your topics

VI. Study questions for next week—need volunteers...

- #1 In the article “The cultural adaptation of the Youth Quality of Life Instrument” the authors use the term “cultural equivalence.” Define it, and describe a few of the components.
- #2 In the same article, researchers recommended changes not only to the Spanish version of the instrument, but also the English version. Why?
- #3 Give two examples of how variables can be operationalized.
- #4 What’s the difference between “systematic error” and “random error”? Give an example of each.
- #5 What’s the difference between “validity” and “reliability”? Give an example of each.

Important Concepts to Know:

- Anonymity
- Back-translation
- Conceptual equivalence
- Confidentiality
- Consent vs. assent
- Cross sectional study
- Cultural equivalence
- Ethnocentrism
- Informed consent
- Longitudinal study
  - Panel—Repeated measurements of same people over time (e.g. annual surveys of MSW alumni)
  - Cohort—Similar to a panel, except different people are measured at different

times. (e.g. a group graduating in 2010 is surveyed; five years later a *different* group is surveyed who had graduated in 2010)

- Trend—Monitors characteristics of a population. (e.g. surveys of each graduating MSW class)
- Measurement equivalence
- Metric equivalence (or scalar equivalence)
- Translation validity (& language equivalence)
- Unit of analysis