

Ethics in Social Science Research

Scott Desposato
UCSD and UZH

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Introductory Remarks

- I'm not an ethicist, and I'm an infrequent experimentalist.
- I'm here today because I have a bad habit of speaking up and telling people what I think.
- One result of this, is that the NSF asked me to organize a conference on ethics in political science experiments:
<http://polisci2.ucsd.edu/polisciethics/>
- Today I'll be talking often about political science, especially about international experiments. However, the issues apply to other fields as well as to many experiments conducted in the United States.

Topics for Today

- There are some real ethical issues associated with many of the things we are doing today. These are especially common when working overseas.
- Existing institutions - including our IRB's - don't provide sufficient guidance and in some contexts, inadequate constraints.
- Whether or not we are willing to admit it, our self-interest can restrict our ability to assess our own work impartially.
- I will identify some of the issues, with examples, and discuss the different opinions on emerging ethical issues.
- I will also offer suggestions for avoiding trouble.*

Ethical issues in Social Science???

- “You’ve got to be kidding me!?!”
- Treatments are almost always fully legal activities that subjects might encounter in their daily lives. What’s the big deal?
- Many experiments in the past were limited to laboratory environments with little deception, full debriefing, and no impact on the real world.
- The real risk to our subjects: boredom

One Measure of Risk

Authors	30
Total Subjects	104,000
Adverse Incidents	1
Reports of Harm	0

Source: Plott, 2013,

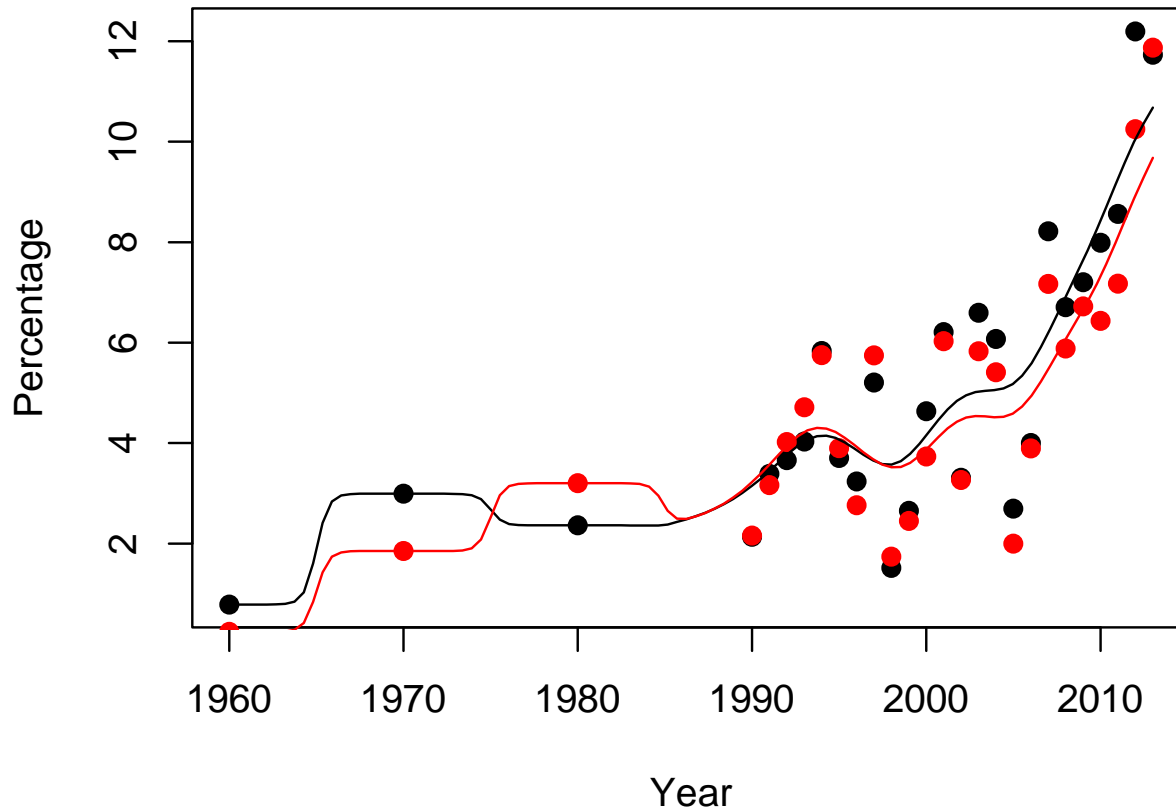
http://sites.nationalacademies.org/DBASSE/BBCSS/CurrentProjects/DBASSE_080452\#.UYA_Rit37lw

What's Changed?

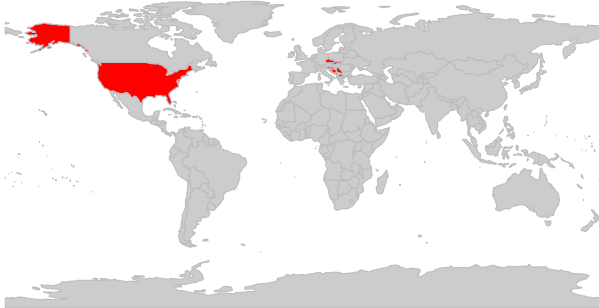
- **Number of Experiments:** Social scientists are conducting more and more experiments, and they are bigger and bigger.
- **Location of Experiments:** These experiments are not just in the United States anymore, but have spread across the globe.
- **Type of Experiments:** We aren't just having undergrads play Dictator Games in class for extra credit.
- **Some Data:** AJPS, APSR, JOP, IO, JCR, CPS, CP; 1990-2013 and 1960, 1970, 1980

What's Changed? More Experiments

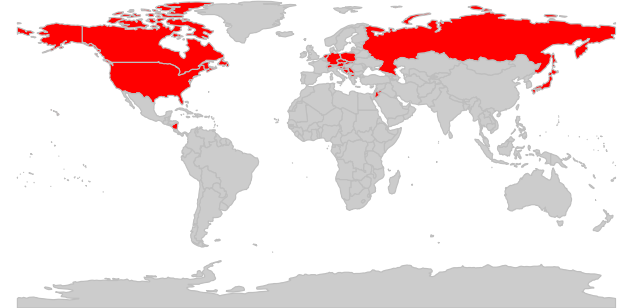
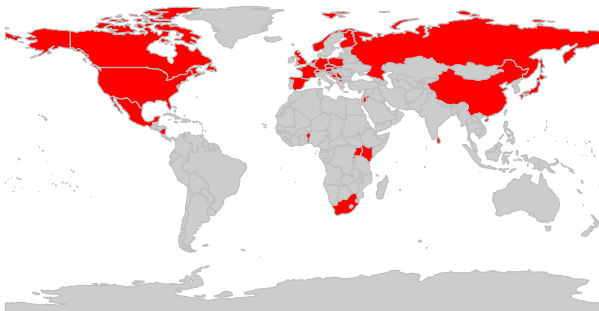
Experiments Published in All Sampled Journals



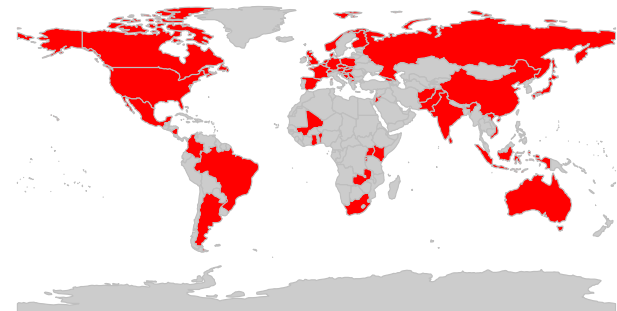
What's Changed? New Contexts



2000's



2010's



What's Changed? New Methods

Decade	Laboratory	Survey	Field
1980*	6.0	0.0	0.0
1990s	6.0	0.0	0.0
2000s	5.8	2.9	0.2
2010+	10.5	19.25	5.5

New Problems

- **Contextual:** We are conducting experiments in entirely new cultural, religious, economic, and security environments with unexpected risks.
- **Legal:** There are complex legal issues associated with conducting experiments overseas that most scholars are ignoring.
- **Field Experiments:** Field experiments hold great promise for scientific progress, but mean we have large numbers of uninformed, unconsenting subjects and bystanders.
- **Agency:** Eager NGO and governmental partners provide an end-run option around IRB, but academics are often the real agents.

A Few Examples

- Several scholars are conducting field experiments during campaigns in Brazil. They provide campaign information on a large scale – to as many as 100,000 subjects. Neighborhoods are randomized to different messages, and results are measured in election results.
 - When we intervene in real elections there's a chance we may affect real outcomes for millions of bystanders.
 - Subjects are unconsenting and uninformed
 - The treatments were illegal under Brazilian campaign laws
 - Brazil has national regulations governing research with human subjects – and none of the scholars involved has complied. So the study was also illegal for that reason.

A Few Examples

- PI's paid confederates to commit traffic crimes in front of police officers, to learn about bribe-seeking as a function of social class
 - Uninformed and unconsenting subjects
 - Bystanders potentially exposed to safety risks
 - No local approval
 - Treatment was illegal and attempted to incite additional illegal activity.
 - PI used US funds to commit crimes in a foreign nation. Is the host university guilty of conspiracy?
 - This one didn't lead to a cure for cancer.

A Few Examples

- PI's worked with an NGO to publicize randomly selected legislators' attendance records in an authoritarian country. The results included changes in legislative behavior and career paths.
 - Public officials don't enjoy IRB protections, and technically the NGO did the randomization, so no one is going to jail.
 - Who is a public official in an authoritarian country? Are party-selected individuals the same as US elected officials? Or are they private citizens?
 - Getting someone else to do our randomization might protect us from litigation, but if we caused the intervention, are we really off the hook?
 - Millions of constituents were affected by legislators' reallocation of time, and we never asked them for approval

Thinking about Solutions

- Each of these has both a practical and an ethical dimension.
- Practical: Are there easy and low-cost design changes we can make to avoid issues all together?
- Ethical: Whether or not there are alternative strategies, do we have any ethical obligation to modify our designs or perhaps skip the experiment all together?

What's At Stake

I've encountered quite a bit of resistance to even discussing these issues, with a strikingly uniform first response: "Don't Shut Us Down!"

My response: unconstrained ambition will shut us down.

- There is risk of real harm to subjects, bystanders, collaborators, and investigators.
- A single scandal could quickly end our access to a specific population, an entire country, or cut off funding. Political Science already has enemies in Congress; do we want to broaden our foe base?
- Don't forget that experimentalists remain a minority of political science, public policy and economics.

Some Key Issues

Field Experiments

- Deception and Consent

- Elections and Public Officials

IRB End-Runs

Legal Issues

- Local Review

Context

- Religion

- Inequality

- Violence

Field Experiments

Many current issues involve the use of field experiments, in particular:

- Often no informed consent and deception of subjects
- There are special risks associated with interventions in elections.
- Public officials' exemption may not be appropriate in some context, and has consequences for bystanders.
- These are all magnified by the fact that our research dollars may go far in the developing world.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a long-standing central feature of human subjects protections, including the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the Belmont Report, and was a core concept in earlier discussions of ethics.

In today's field experiments, frequently neither the treatment nor the control group are informed or consenting.

At the same time, the consequences of assignment to treatment or control may have dramatic impacts on subjects lives. Randomizing a health clinic or water treatment almost certainly means someone will die because of the assignment.

Deception and Consent

Many field experiments use uninformed and unconsenting subjects.

Recall the requirements for waiver or modification of informed consent (all of the below):

- ...no more than minimal risk

- ...will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects

- ...could not be practicably carried out without the waiver

- ... the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation

There is a great diversity of opinion, however, on what scholars believe is ethical. Some have no problem with deception in a laboratory when subjects are debriefed; others oppose deception of any kind.

Diverse Proposed Solutions

No solutions needed if benefits exceed costs.

Alternative forms of consent

Informed Consent

Implied Consent

Proxy (delegated) consent

Superset / Package Consent

Deferred (Retrospective) Consent

Inferred (surrogate) consent

Full consent? Announce field experiment via radio advertising, or send letters a month ahead of time announcing a study.

Do it in a lab. Or at least don't break the law.

Deception with Implied Benefit

More than an “invisible hand”, we interact with subjects and deceive them as to our intentions:

- We send thousands of resumes to potential employers

- We make client inquiries to businesses

- We contact politicians with potential problems

In each case, the subject acts with some expectation of benefit: a new employee, a new business opportunity, more goodwill from constituents, and so on.

Terrific design when subjects are unlikely to cooperate, or are likely to modify their behavior when they know they are being studied.

Deception with Implied Benefit

What's the cost? Just a few minutes of subject time, which they'll never miss!

Yes, but: suppose you have 10,000 complying subjects, and each spends perhaps 12 minutes on your task. That's (12*10000) total subject minutes, or about one year of free labor.

Would an IRB ever approve deceiving a single subject into committing a year to our study without compensation?

So why is it acceptable to “atomize” that cost? Is it simply theft?

Deception with Implied Benefit

Strategies to mitigate cost to subjects:

Try a power analysis. Do you really need 10,000 subjects? What are you compensating for? A really small effect? If the effect is so small as to need 10,000 subjects, is it really relevant and important?

Compensate subjects: Can one find a way to compensate subjects for their time? Cell phone credits?

Negative compensation: Require scholars to pay into some benevolence fund for each uninformed and deceived subject. This will discourage excess and provide some social benefit.

Not everyone agrees you need to do this....

Interventions in Political Processes

Consider Three types of Political Interventions:

- Elected officials

- Campaigns

- Other forms of citizen-leader interaction

Who is an elected official, and what is fair game?

Obvious cases: any elected official in the US.

But in other contexts, it isn't so clear who should have protection and who should not.

- Who is a public official in an authoritarian state?

- Are hereditary village leaders in traditional societies public officials?

- Are bureaucrats public officials?

Who is a Public Official?

Ask yourself about:

The level of the actor

The footprint of their public profile

The share of time devoted to public duties

Their aspirations

The broader political context

Issues Associated With Treating Public Officials

Interventions with public officials could change the nature of representation and thus have spillover effects.

Suppose a treatment raises attendance in a legislature. Is that a good thing? Or should they be passing out bags of cement instead?

Distracting officials with letters to study responsiveness to letters with minority names might reduce minority representation!

If an official loses their office due to a treatment, is that harm?

Do public officials have any private life that is “off-limits” to research?

Generally, there is a great deal of variance in scholars’ attitudes about the appropriateness of this kind of research.

Can We Intervene in Elections?

Some controversy over whether these are ethical.

Field experiments providing information to voters and/or working with candidates to randomize campaign messages.

Randomizing GOTV messages.

Polling station monitoring.

Can We Intervene in Elections?

On the one hand, we may affect the outcome

Voters are uninformed and unconsenting.

Votes are some citizens' only currency for affecting politics. Should we really be manipulating voting behavior?

Campaign messages can be administered in a lab. Why do we need to risk affecting election outcomes?

What will happen to future research when an anti-American journalist runs with this?

On the other hand, so what?

Providing information is exactly what candidates and consultants are doing, and their motives are probably less altruistic than ours.

How can providing people with information be a bad thing?

Can We Intervene in Elections?

An implicit issue here is that we aren't sure if our dependent variable is doing harm or good. We can agree that slowing tumor growth rates is a good thing for human welfare. But can we judge which candidate would be better? Whether more turnout or less turnout is a good thing?

Some seem to implicitly fall back on a “Prime Directive” when we aren't confident in the harm/benefit of outcomes: don't intervene in or affect the natural progression of the studied society.

As we argued about these things an incredulous representative from an international NGO noted that affecting elections was EXACTLY what they were hoping to do, and they were surprised at our angst over this issue.

Field Experiments - Recommendations

- Obviously, assess risk to and impact on bystanders
- Try to design an experiment with informed consent.
- If your study requires deception:
 - Minimize sample size.
 - Try an online survey to test for some form of consent.
 - Do it in a lab or survey experiment.
 - Try to provide compensation

NGO's and the IRB End-Run

- IRB's have approved all sorts of questionable research. Even so, from time to time we come up with a design that even an IRB won't approve.
- One solution: get an unregulated agency to do it for you! Then it's "fresh data", and you can publish it!
- Practically, this means that you partner with an NGO or government agency who conducts the randomization under your direction. Or – start your own NGO and have it randomize. Then you can skip the IRB!
- Development NGO's report increasing pressure from donors to conduct randomizations – which is good – but the pressure sometimes means that they struggle to tweak their programs to fit our designs.

NGO's and the IRB End-Run

Many think this is absolutely acceptable. However, there are other positions and recommendations:

- Ask yourself: Are you the cause of the treatment? Did you prompt the agency to conduct the randomization? If so, it's your project and deserves IRB review.
- Full disclosure: the nature of your relationship with the agency, including compensation and discussion of ethics.
- Alert your partner to potential ethical issues and advise them to comply with standard protections.
- Require IRB review for publication of any third party randomization. This would reduce any conflict of interest between scholar and client/NGO.

Legal Issues: Local Review

- Most university IRB's don't require social scientists to demonstrate host country approval of research protocols. NSF also does not ask us for this. In contrast, NIH does ask for approval, though usually does not apply to us.
- However, many countries have local rules – sometimes laws – that govern the conduct of research. Research by foreigners often gets special scrutiny.
- Scholars in many countries are simply ignoring those laws, flying in on tourist visas, running experiments, and heading home with data.
- Note that this would be perfectly legal in most cases in the United States because regulations have limited application.

Local Review

- How should scholars proceed when there is no local IRB or regulations?
- Alternatively, suppose there is a local IRB, but:
 - No one else is using it.
 - The IRB is incompetent.
 - The IRB is corrupt.
 - Rules regarding research are designed to prevent anything that threatens the government.

Local Review

- Further, does it matter whether the host government is a democracy or authoritarian regime?
- There is A LOT of “under the radar” work going on; some participants in our conference were told not to attend, as they might jeopardize a nice cottage industry in illegal experiments.
- Let’s consider a few case studies.

Authoritarian Regimes: Vietnam

No formal review procedures that we know of.

- If you ask for approval, the answer will be no.
- Collaborate with a local partner who can provide a contextual sensibility.
- Collaborate with the Vietnamese government. This implies a public policy question:
 - Study firms' offering bribes when bidding on contracts.
 - Randomize traffic cameras to test their impact on violations.
- Downside: collaboration will severely limit topics of study.

Authoritarian Regimes: China

- Number 7 Decree (Rules Concerning Investigation with Foreign Participation) by the National Bureau of Statistics of China
- This decree governs market as well as social research.
- Foreign involvement means that the study is funded by or in cooperation with foreign individuals or entities.
- Foreign involvement requires a license to carry out a study.
- Risks: fines, revoking license, and criminal prosecution.

Authoritarian Regimes: China

If you ask for permission you will almost certainly not get it.

Who is at risk during illegal studies in China?

PI's

Local Collaborators

Subjects

Practical strategies:

Collaborate with academic institutions

Independent research without approval

Commercial market research firms

Internet surveys

Democratic Regimes: Malawi

Lots of experience with research; subjects often want to skip the informed consent, since they know it so well.

Local and home review are required by an appropriate ethics review board.

Scholar must affiliate with an approved local institute.

The required use of local enumerators has caused some additional ethical problems.

Projects must include training, scholarships, mentorship, co-authorship, data access, and acknowledgments.

Subjects are so familiar with the process that they may ask to skip the informed consent.

Fees: 10% of the project budget

Democratic Regimes: Brazil

- CNS 196/96 regulates all studies with human subjects.
- There is a hierarchy of IRB's with a national committee in the ministry of health (CONEP) that certifies and supervises local CEP's at each institute.
- Most studies can be approved by a local CEP - unless they are especially high risk (medical, experimental, or have foreign involvement)
- Fortunately, rules require 30-day turn-around by CEP, and 60-day by CONEP
- Compensation of subjects is illegal
- Local affiliation is required, and technology transfer when appropriate.

Brazil – Our Experience

- We sought approval for a survey experiment where voters chose a preferred candidate from a set of hypothetical profiles. We were exploring race, gender, and choice set effects.
- UCSD approved the study 21 days after we submitted our application.
- We did not receive approval in Brazil for more than a year. Some parts of the delay had explanations, though frustrating: an IRB on strike or a change in application formats (though the old format was the only one on their website). Most of the delay, however, remains a mystery.

Brazil

- Medical researchers have confirmed that this is actually a fairly quick turnaround.
- We don't know of any other political scientist that has pursued ethical review in Brazil.
- In the interim, others published similar work without any review.
- The Brazilians are trying to revise their procedures – and we are trying to help.

Foreign Review Suggestions

- We have a responsibility to comply with other countries' laws governing research whenever feasible and possible – especially with democracies.
- Adopt a norm of compliance, work with colleagues in host country to develop and lobby for more reasonable procedures, and in the interim, suffer some delays.
- This requires a collective commitment – otherwise you'll get scooped while waiting a year for local IRB approval.
- Authoritarian regimes deserve a little less respect, but try to adapt. Can your experiment be made abstract and innocuous? Lab experiments on math problems instead of discourse focus groups critical of the government?

Foreign Review Suggestions

- One other possibility involves a page from internet gambling's playbook: one might conduct internet surveys with computers located out-of-country.
- I've been called "stupid" for trying to comply with local rules; there are many that disagree with me. On the other hand, medical scientists would never go overseas without local buy-in.
- If you cannot get local approval or no local IRB exists, ask a local academic or researcher to look over your design for possible ethical problems.
- If you decide to try a "black ops experiment", carefully consider the risks to yourself, enumerators, subjects, the discipline, and possibly to diplomacy.

Contextual Issues

- Religion
- Violence
- Inequality and Poverty

Context: Religion

- Standard economic games that involve chance may violate Islamic prohibitions on gambling.
 - Risks: stressful experience for subjects that may have some social costs. Possible backlash against PI.
 - One solution (Becky Morton): Instead of “betting” on numbers, design the experiment around “finding the best route through traffic”. Of course transit times are random variables.

Context: Religion

- Some experiments attempt to manipulate religion to measure its impact on some other variable.
 - Manipulating others religious beliefs may have social costs for subjects, may make them very uncomfortable, and may provoke backlash. Religion relies on unverifiable truth claims.
 - Measurement versus manipulation
 - Everyday imagery versus direct persuasion.

Context: Violence

- In many places, just talking about politics is dangerous. An insecure environment may place investigators, enumerators, and subjects all at risk.
- Enumerators have been kidnapped in Mexico and have faced lynch mobs in Guatemala.
- Cambodian political bosses have threatened survey respondents.
- Participation in surveys has reduced turnout in unconsolidated democracies.
- Field experiments have primed ethnicity in regions of ethnic violence.

Context: Violence

- Are studies that expose enumerators and/or subjects to security risks ethical?
- Yes. There is a risk of violence, but it is part of daily life. Enumerators and subjects are free agents that can choose to participate or not. Alternative employment opportunities may be riskier.
- No. Research should never be the cause of violence against enumerators or subjects. Both are subject to undue influence from foreign PI's. Extensive precautions should be taken.

Context: Inequality

- Small payments or other forms of compensation to subject may generate resentment, may divide communities, or may lead to violence in impoverished settings.
- Sampling and lotteries, which may seem fair to those who have training in probability, may not seem fair to those on the receiving end.
- In some countries, compensation of subjects is illegal.
- Proposed Solutions:
 - Extended discussions and explanations of sampling with subjects
 - Single payment to entire community.
 - If no alternative: give compensation to a local charity.

Some Parting Thoughts

- There's no belief that any social scientists are particularly evil or that they are seeking to spread human misery. Most of our studies continue to be low risk.
- But there's room for trouble in our world:
 - IRB's aren't ethical committees – they exist to comply with federal rules and keep dollars flowing.
 - We are curious, ambitious, and in many cases, dedicated to solving a particular policy problem through good science. We want answers.
 - We are operating in environments where we have a great deal of potential power and where there is only weak regulation.
 - The net result: Ethical research is often NOT in our personal interest, or even in the interest of “good science”. It is often in our career interests as well as good science to deceive, to administer aggressive treatments, to ignore local review, or to send enumerators or subjects into harm's way.

John Charles Cutler

- An experimentalist who had a distinguished career and impact on his field.
- Senior position at a good university
- Led major government research initiatives in disease control and eradication
- “Tireless in the fight against sexually transmitted diseases”
- Dedicated to good science

John Charles Cutler

- He was a lead investigator in a study in Guatemala, where hundreds of uninformed, unconsenting, and coerced subjects were deliberately infected with syphilis.
- He did such a nice job on that study, that he was promoted and sent to work on a merely observational study where African American men in Tuskegee were deceived regarding the provision of treatment for “bad blood”, when in fact they were used to observe the long term effects of syphilis.
- When interviewed about these studies, he firmly defended the science.
- And everyone says he was a really, really nice guy.

John Charles Cutler, revisited

- Subjects were unconsenting and uninformed. Some were coerced. (Just like in many of our field experiments)
- Cutler had approval for the studies and was working for the government (“It got past IRB, it must be ok” or “the NGO I work with did the treatment – so it’s fresh data!”)
- The study in Guatemala was technically illegal, but the Guatemalans enthusiastically welcomed it (for our part, we usually don’t even have local approval)

John Charles Cutler, revisited

- Subjects wouldn't have had access to treatment anyway (just like when we randomize public goods)
- Cutler ignored downstream consequences on bystanders, including spouses and children (we usually ignore spillovers in field experiments).
- When asked, Cutler strongly defended the science.

Two critical differences

- The benefits to science of most of our studies are probably significantly lower than any work on disease.
- The amount of human misery inflicted by our studies is probably smaller, most of the time.

Parting thoughts

- You can't outsource ethical judgements to IRB's – you need to think carefully about what you are doing and what the consequences will be.
- You need to be part of a broad dialogue on ethics, because some problems will require collective effort to solve.
- Ignoring these issues has potentially serious consequences to subjects, enumerators, investigators, and our entire disciplines.
- I've presented some of the diverse opinions from political science, and given you a series of questions you can ask yourself.

WWBORD?

- What would Bill O'Reilly do if your study were conducted by foreign scholars in his neighborhood? If you would be uncomfortable under a journalist's scrutiny, perhaps you should consider a different design.

