

# ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SEX AND AGGRESSION RESEARCH

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## Introduction

Over the past several years of conducting sex and aggression research, it has become apparent to us that there are a fairly large number of special ethical issues to be addressed in such research, and that these issues should be communicated to other researchers. This paper presents a discussion of these concerns, and describes the ethical precautions we have developed for use in our own research. These procedures concern the materials used, voluntary participation, deception and debriefing, and monitoring. It is hoped that by communicating what we have learned from our own experiences, we can help other researchers to avoid ethical pitfalls in their own research programs.

## Ethical Considerations in Sex and Aggression Research

The purpose of this paper is to (a) outline general ethical principles and concerns with sex and aggression research, as well as some specific concerns, (b) outline the precautions we have developed in our own sex and aggression research, and (c) indicate our past experience with ethics at the university of Manitoba. We will make reference to both areas of study for each of the three topics referred to above. We should like to note at the outset that our research is fully consistent with the Ethical Standards of the Canadian and American Psychological Associations, and, as will be apparent from the detailed discussion below, our general policy is to be overly cautious.

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### Ethical Principles and Concerns

As Malamuth (1983) has detailed elsewhere, there are a number of ethical principles that are applicable to aggression research but especially to sex research, because "society has often treated sexuality as a taboo topic and many people understandably wish to keep their sexual lives private. It is clear that research in this area needs to be particularly sensitive to ethical safeguards" (p. 231). Malamuth has indicated five basic ethical safeguards, all of which we typically employ in our research at the University of Manitoba;

1. Only volunteers who are fully aware of the procedures to be used in the research should serve as subjects.
2. Pressures should not be exerted on people to volunteer.
3. Subjects should not participate in any new activities as part of the research that they have not previously chosen to engage in.
4. Subjects must be free to leave at any time, for any reason, without any penalty whatsoever.
5. A thorough debriefing must be held to explain any procedures that may involve deception.

With respect to sex research in general, Paul Abramson (1977) has found that subjects in sex studies which employ these ethical safeguards almost uniformly report that they found their experience with the research to be positive and devoid of any negative after-effects. With respect to our own sex research at the University of Manitoba, however, there was an additional ethical concern regarding the effects of exposing research subjects to depictions of forced sexual encounters which, for example, portray the victim as enjoying the assault. Since our research has demonstrated that such exposure can, for example, lead to attitude change regarding the acceptability of force in sexual encounters (Malamuth & Check, 1981), it is for ethical reasons necessary to debrief subjects (in order to counteract these attitudes), and to follow up these debriefings with an assessment of their effectiveness. With respect to aggression research, Smith and Richardson (1983) have found that subjects who participate in a variety of deception studies (including aggression

studies) experience no ill effects if a proper debriefing procedure is used.

### Ethical Precautions

The precautions we have developed at the University of Manitoba over the past several years concern (a) materials to be used, (b) voluntary participation (points 1 to 4 above), (c) deception and debriefing (point 5 above), and (d) monitoring.

#### Materials

Since there may be some general concern about the nature of the sexual materials we use, it should be noted that we use sexual depictions (both rape depictions and consenting sex depictions) which are adapted from those currently available to subjects in varied mass media outlets (e.g., Playboy and Penthouse, magazines).

#### Voluntary Participation

In general, introductory psychology students at the University of Manitoba are given the option of writing a paper or participating in seven hours of experiments. The regulations regarding recruitment of subjects stipulate that each experiment is advertised in class, where a sign-up booklet is usually circulated.

Sex Research. In our sex research studies, we typically state on the sign-up booklet that the research involves the use of detailed questionnaires about a variety of sexual and other personal matters, that the research involves exposure to "sexually explicit pornography" (where applicable), and involves the physiological assessment of sexual arousal (again, where applicable, such as in studies which employ penile tumescence measures of sexual arousal). Thus, subjects are free to sign up or not sign up as they choose. When subjects arrive at the research room (in groups), their experiment credit cards are immediately signed, and it is explicitly stated that they are free to leave at any time, without any penalty whatsoever, if there is anything which they find objectionable about the study. For some studies the sexual depictions are typewritten and included at the end of the questionnaire, so that subjects can just leave if they do not wish to read the sexual depiction. For other studies we are interested in the physiological assessment of

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males' sexual arousal (vis a vis penile tumescence), and we usually use tape-recorded depictions. The usual procedure in this latter type of study is to have subjects participate (in groups) in an "orientation session," where they first fill out a large questionnaire and receive one experimental credit. They are then given a detailed description of the procedures which are used to assess penile tumescence. Subjects are told to (1) read over the description, (2) decide if they wish to participate in this "second experiment," and (3) if they wish, sign up for one of the sessions (where they participate individually in private rooms), or simply leave if they do not wish to participate further. Thus, subjects sign up for the physiological assessment phase in an active manner, with no coercion whatsoever, and they receive experimental credit for the questionnaire phase regardless of whether they also sign up for the physiological assessment phase. All those who participate in the physiological assessment phase are, of course, given another experimental credit, as soon as they arrive at the laboratory. They are then left in complete privacy, to (1) read the instructions on how to connect the equipment, (2) sign the following informed consent form,

Participation in this study involves placing a small band around one's penis, reading written stories, and listening to audiotapes with explicit sexual content. These procedures have been fully explained to me. I AM AWARE THAT I MAY LEAVE NOW OR AT ANY TIME DURING THE EXPERIMENT, IF I SO WISH, WITHOUT HAVING TO GIVE ANY EXPLANATION AND WITH NO PENALTY WHATSOEVER. I am also aware that the data gathered in this research are confidential and anonymous with respect to any individual's identity. (Signed or initialed),

and (3) either close the research room door and proceed with the experiment or simply leave without having to speak to the experimenter (the experimenter is in a separate room and communicates via intercom). Once again, subjects give informed consent, are not coerced in any way, and are made to feel that they are free to leave at any time without penalty.

Aggression Research. In our aggression studies (which employ ostensible delivery of aversive noise as the measure of aggression), we use an "ESP" task as the cover story. Briefly, in a rigged lottery, the subject is assigned to the role of "transmitter," and is instructed to attempt to send numbers via ESP to another subject (actually a confederate of the experimenter) who's ostensible task is to guess the numbers. The subject is instructed to "punish" the confederate for incorrect guesses, ostensibly using aversive noise (no noise is actually sent). A sample of noise is given ahead of time, (a 70 db tone). Subjects are then given an informed consent form to sign, which explicitly states that they will not be penalized if they withdraw (as with the sexuality studies, subjects' experiment credit cards are signed as soon as they arrive at the research setting).

Deception and Debriefing

In general, we place a great emphasis on debriefing, with respect to both our sex research studies and our aggression studies.

Sex Research. The major ethical concern relevant to debriefing following exposure to explicit sexual depictions concerns the use of rape depictions. The reason for this is that much of our research is directed towards examining the antisocial effects of exposure to rape depictions in which, for example, the rape victim is portrayed as enjoying the assault, or in which the victim is likely to be seen as responsible for her own rape. These types of depictions are hypothesized to increase subjects' rape myth acceptance attitudes (e.g., beliefs that rape victims enjoy rape or beliefs that victims are to be blamed for their own rapes). This being the case, our overall policy is to (a) give subjects a debriefing at the end of the experiment which is designed to counteract or reverse the effects of such exposure, and (b) assess the effectiveness of the debriefing. For example, the debriefing we typically use in our research on victim blaming is as follows;

While the following is probably obvious to all subjects, we would like to emphasize that the story you read [or heard] was COMPLETE FANTASY. Some of you read a story which depicted a rape. In reality, as you are hopefully aware, rape

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is a serious crime, punishable by many years in prison. As well, rape victims suffer severe psychological damage as well as the more obvious physical effects of the assault. Unfortunately, many people still believe a number of falsehoods or myths about rape. For example, one totally unfounded myth is that if a woman does not immediately report a rape, or hesitates to report it, then the act is somehow not considered a real rape. A second falsehood that many people mistakenly believe is that if a woman does anything which puts her at greater risk or makes her more vulnerable to being victimized (e.g., going to a man's apartment, or kissing with a man when alone with him), then it is her own fault if she is subsequently raped, i.e., she somehow brings the rape upon herself. Clearly, a woman should not feel guilty about being raped just because she let a man kiss her but decided not to go any farther with him. A third totally false myth is that women want to be raped or are turned on by rape. All of these are in fact just myths and are in fact totally unfounded. Hopefully, if you realize that these myths are totally false, you will leave this experiment with a more realistic and accurate view of rape.

With respect to the effectiveness of these debriefings, we have found that the overall impact of exposure to the rape depiction followed by an appropriate debriefing is to actually reduce subjects' rape myth acceptance below the level of subjects who were not exposed to rape (Check, 1982, 1984; Check & Malamuth, 1984; Malamuth & Check, 1984).

Aggression Research. There are two deceptions in our aggression research which necessitate debriefing; the fact that the subject is insulted (given a false negative evaluation) by the confederate, and the fact that the ESP cover story is false. Therefore, the following debriefing is given at the end of the experiment;

Now that your active participation in the study has come to an end, we would

like to offer you a more extensive, and accurate description of the experiment. If you have any questions, or concerns about any aspect of the study, please feel free to discuss them with the experimenter. It was never the intent of this study to focus on your ability to transmit ESP. The actual purpose of the experiment, was to demonstrate how an unpleasant personal evaluation would affect a subject's selection of an unpleasant stimulus.

You were initially informed that you would be involved in an ESP experiment, so that you would not feel unnecessarily self-conscious about the delivery of an unpleasant stimulus. This deception was unavoidable, because it has been shown that when subjects are aware that a particular behaviour is being studied, they have a tendency to change that behaviour.

The receiver in this experiment was not an actual subject, but a 'confederate'. This means he (she) was a part of the experiment, and he (she) plays this role for each of the sessions we run. Furthermore, the negative evaluation you received was prepared well before the experiment began, and each subject who participates receives the same evaluation. The confederate never actually used your answers, nor did he (she) write the evaluation you received. The evaluation was intended to give you a negative impression of the confederate. It is extremely important that we assure you that in no way does the evaluation reflect any meaningful statements or valid opinions concerning yourself.

At no point during the study, did the confederate hear the 'aversive noise' or attempt to receive the numbers you were transmitting. The numbers the computer gave you to transmit, and the correct or incorrect responses to these numbers were all programmed before the study began.

Finally, we would like to apologize for the deception that was involved in

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the experiment. Unfortunately, we are not aware of any alternative methods that are available for performing a study of this nature. We would also like to assure you that we are not suggesting that the delivery of an unpleasant stimulus, such as the aversive noise used in this study, is any indication of undesirable behaviour on the part of the subject. The subject is expected to deliver the stimulus, and the experiment is arranged in such a manner, so as to increase the likelihood that he will do so.

Again we thank you for participating and we hope that you found the experiment at least mildly interesting.

We have just recently completed a study of the effectiveness of this debriefing, and the preliminary findings suggest that the debriefing was very effective in alleviating subjects' concerns about the negative evaluation. As well, it seems that the vast majority of the subjects found the study to be the most interesting and worthwhile research experience that they had had all year. In fact, several subjects spontaneously indicated that their biggest complaint about participating in psychological experiments was that they found them to be boring!

### Monitoring

In addition to requiring the evaluation of the Human Subjects Ethical Review Committee at the University of Manitoba, we have established an independent Advisory Committee composed of members of the general community (including a lawyer), who review and monitor all the procedures used, and to whom an Ombudsman reports. The name and phone number of the Ombudsman is given to each and every subject who participates in our research, and subjects are asked to report their concerns to this person if they have any which we do not satisfactorily deal with. The Ombudsman is not otherwise affiliated with the project or department. While we have not had a single complaint from over two thousand subjects so far, we none the less feel that the position of Ombudsman serves an important function, if for no other reason than it allows subjects to feel that



they have an independent agent to whom they can voice any concerns.

**Past Experience with Ethics**

All of the procedures outlined above have been reviewed by a number of reviewing bodies, including our Department of Psychology Human Ethical Review Committee, our Faculty of Arts Ethical Review Committee, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Research Grants Division). As well, several smaller granting agencies have made final judgements with respect to small individual projects. Through a continual process of interaction with these bodies and with ethics researchers in this area, we have evolved the ethical safeguards outlined above. While we have occasionally been requested to revise minor aspects of our procedures, there has never to our knowledge been a single major question raised about the ethicality of our current research procedures. None the less, we realize that it would be imprudent for any researcher to assume that his/her ethical behaviour is perfect, and therefore we would appreciate feedback about any aspects of our procedures which any reader feels may be improved.