

# Ethical Issues in Online Social Work Research

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## Abstract

Human subject's protection issues for online research are identified and applied to social work researchers, organized around the three broad principles of the Belmont Report and NASW's Code of Ethics. Social work specific concerns include sensitivity to differences in philosophical approaches to ethics, social justice/equity issues, and technological competence. Recommendations for ethical online research are offered.

*Key Words:* Online research, ethics, social work research, institutional review board, Internet

## Introduction

The Internet has been called “a passing fancy that will eventually find its way to the same cultural dump as hula hoops,” or in contrast, “. . . a panacea for society's problems” (Karger & Levine, 1999, p. xv). Vallee (2003) described French cyberneticist de Rosnay's view that the use of computers for human interaction may lead to “. . . a cold and personal social reality in which human contact would be minimized” (p. 37), but Vallee believes that the Internet can create “electronic grapevines” that can further creativity and enhance culture. Despite conflicting views, Internet use has grown exponentially since its inception.

What about use of the Internet in social science research? For example, a social work researcher wishes to study the biopsychosocial issues addressed in online hospice support groups. She intends to use postings from an online discussion group for data. While she knows that all human subjects research must be authorized by her university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), she wonders if the persons using the site are considered “human subjects.” If so, what are the salient ethical issues? Consent? Anonymity? Confidentiality? Other kinds of harm?

The purpose of this article is to articulate ethical issues related to the protection of human subjects when using computer based online data and identify issues that relate specifically to *social work* research. Knowledge of these issues can help social work researchers address the concerns of their IRB, better protect their research subjects, and participate in setting research related policy.

Research questions include: Are cyberspace researchers accessing information provided by individual human beings in a way that involves the need for human subjects' protection? Do ethical principles related to face to face or traditional research translate directly to online research? How do you address these issues in an IRB protocol? And in the case of online *social work* research, is there is a need to go beyond these basic ethical requirements in order to reflect the profession's emphasis on the values of the right to self-determination and the promotion of social justice and equity?

## **A History of Internet Research Ethics**

### **Emergence of the Internet**

Because most current research using computers involves the Internet, some history is presented for context. The Internet arose from the need for communication networking among computer scientists. Early efforts during the 1960's was funded by the Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Administration (Marson, 1997). This initial research evolved to a current monthly home Internet use of more than 205,133,043 persons (as of May 2006) (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2006).

Whereas the Internet has been the domain of commerce, academic institutions have shaped its conceptualization and growth (Jones, 1999). In particular, the fields of social and behavioral sciences, including social work, have found computer mediated communication to be full of research opportunities (Waskul, 1996). Internet based research includes qualitative and quantitative methods such as surveys, content analysis, grounded theory, virtual ethnography, and narrative analyses (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2003). Data sources include e-mail, listservs, newsgroups, discussion groups, chat groups, games, and Internet Web pages (Ess & AoIR, 2002).

### **Internet Research Ethics**

By the 1980s the field of computer ethics emerged in philosophy. This branch of applied ethics deals with traditional philosophical theories as they relate to the use of computers as well as practical ethical topics such as codes of conduct and public policy. Several organizations such as the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), and the Computer Ethics Institute (a branch of The Brookings Institute) began formulating formal codes of ethics (Bynum, 2001; Computer Ethics Institute, 1992). While these were a start in defining ethical issues in computer related data collection, the generalities presented

in these efforts did not specifically address using Internet material for academic research with human subjects.

In 1999, a collaborative effort of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the federal Office for Protection from Research Risks (OPRR) yielded a report that outlined relevant issues in human subjects' online research (Frankel & Siang, 1999). The intended audience included online researchers as well as members of IRBs. Using the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), the report identified issues and made recommendations for a research and education agenda. In a similar report, Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (2002) published a set of ethical guidelines for online research intended for researchers, ethicists, students, IRBs, and those in academic societies.

These efforts laid the groundwork for identifying the general ethical issues related to doing Internet research, but which of these issues are particularly salient for social work research? For those social work researchers at academic universities, are their current IRBs knowledgeable about differences in the ethical issues related to Internet research in order to protect human subjects? Looking beyond the IRB, are there issues more relevant to social work values and ethics that need to be addressed when doing online research that relate to the larger issue of responsible conduct of research?

### **Use of the Internet and Social Work**

Concern regarding use of computer technology in social work practice and research grew during the first wave. Reamer (1986) was one of the first to point out the potential for ethical violations such as privacy issues. Cwikel and Cnaan (1991) provided an early warning that use of technology could interfere with providing humane and competent social work practice, and Giffords (1998) noted that “. . . this electronic frontier [also] may be dangerous” (p. 244).

Social workers' use of computer technology can be characterized as having three waves. Cwikel and Cnaan (1991) described the first two. Wave one involved the use of computers for administrative purposes such as word processing, developing simple databases, and statistics. The second wave, starting in the late 1980s, focused on social work practice and involved the use of games and other programs for therapeutic benefit, ability to store more information concerning clients in advanced databases, and the use of communication tools such as e-mail.

The current third wave of computer technology in social work involves the increased use of computers for educational purposes, such as use of online databases, WebCT, and Blackboard in the classroom (e.g., Biggerstaff, 2005; Bolen, 2006; Cascio & Gasker, 2001; McNutt, 2000), electronic advocacy, practice purposes such as online support groups, aftercare support for at risk teens, and therapy provided online (e.g., Finn, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002; Pacifici, White, Cummings, & Nelson, 2005; Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1996).

Examples of uses of online data in social work research include a study of an online group of sexual abuse survivors by Finn and Lavitt (1994), and a study of computer use of foster children and families by Finn, Kerman, and Lecornec (2005). Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, and Wessel (1996) reported on the use of a bulletin board for women with breast cancer; Marziali, Donahue, and Crossin (2005) studied virtual group process with caregivers of those with a neurodegenerative disease; and Opalinski (2001) used online survey research to study older adults and the digital divide.

These social work pioneers using online data were breaking ethical ground for future Internet researchers. However, as Marson and Brackin (2000) asked, “How do I examine and analyze ethical issues with no clear guidelines?” (p. 4). Finn and Lavitt (1997) have been criticized by a number of authors who targeted their study and used it as an example of a violation of informed consent and anonymity (Frankel & Siang, 1999; King, 1996; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). King (1996) notes that while this article is an “. . . excellent analysis of a cyberspace self-help group” (p. 4), the reporting of the name of the actual group, as well as the exact date and times of the quoted notes, “. . . is a potential nightmare” (p. 4).

While other researchers note in methodology sections that they obtained informed consent prior to use of data, this is not reported in all studies. Online surveys are a good example of inconsistency in use of methods to ensure human subjects protection. These are becoming increasingly common using Web-based sites like Survey Monkey (see <http://www.surveymonkey.com>). On sites such as <http://psych.hanover.edu/research/exponnet.html>, one can participate in any number of social science-related surveys. A sample of these surveys shows a wide variety of ways that informed consent is used, such as linking the survey to a statement that the participant has read the consent and agrees to the conditions of participation. Others have some language about voluntary participation and anonymity but have no link to the survey, and some sites have no informed consent at all (see Web site for examples; surveys are added on a regular basis). It should be noted

that there is no way for the researchers to know if those participating have read the consent, even with appropriate links. Many survey sites also hope to increase motivation by use of drawings for money. Participants must leave their e-mail addresses in this case, allowing the researchers access to respondent identity.

The above examples raise ethical issues that are not found in face-to-face research.

### **Ethical Framework for Social Work Online Research**

The organization, responsibilities, and ethical decision-making of IRBs in the U.S. are spelled out in CFR 45.46 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, 2001). The ethical foundation of this law is the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) -- the final report of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, established in 1974. According to the Belmont Report, ethical protection of human subjects in research devolves to general principles that should instruct how humans are to be treated, including in the research setting. These principles are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The IRB may only authorize research for which the potential benefits of the research outweigh the potential costs to the subjects, taking into account the above principles. Thus, the final IRB decision is a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. In contrast, the deontological approach used in Europe considers foundational human rights that may supersede any amount of potential benefits from proposed research. This “line-drawing” approach deriving from the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki has been criticized as being inappropriately inflexible (Kopelman, 2000). Even in a U.S. IRB, the belief systems of the members might weight certain human rights so heavily that it amounts to deontologically-based ethical decision making.

There are other approaches to ethical decision making, such as an “ethics of care” perspective. It has been compared to the “ethics of justice” perspective (Botes, 2000), linked to social justice (Caputo, 2002), and discussed among academics in nursing, education, and health care settings. Gilligan (1994) is credited with developing a feminine ethic of care model based on her work in women’s developmental theory. Social work scholars have called for the use of this model in order to “. . . take social work out of the mothering mode and assign it to a rational field of inquiry” (Freedberg, 1993, p. 539). It is increasingly used as a foundation for social work practice (e.g., see Caputo, 2002; Furman, Downey, & Jackson, 2004). Characteristics of this

perspective include a holistic rather than reductionistic view, use of social context, and an emphasis on empathy and relationship (Botes, 2000).

When applied to Internet research, a utilitarian approach would weigh the risks of research participants in the online support group against the benefits that the research would provide to the group and the scientific community. A deontological approach would protect the rights of those posting on the site regardless of the possible benefits of the research. An ethics of care approach would emphasize the researcher's ability to see the posters as human subjects rather than just narrative. The researcher must consider which of these approaches best fits his or her own belief system and understand the perspectives taken by that of his/her university's IRB. If an IRB includes members with a deontological approach, a researcher whose philosophy is strictly utilitarian, or ethics of care may have to deal with unexpected issues in an Internet-based research project. The social work profession has a value system that emphasizes human rights and may have a better fit with a hybrid approach that is based primarily on an ethics of care with deontological and utilitarian aspects when appropriate.

The following sections address pertinent issues of doing online research within the context of social work values using the basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report. Table 1 lists the Belmont Report's principles and their related applications with corresponding National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics' values and standards.

### **Respect for Persons and Beneficence**

The first two basic principles, "Respect for Persons" and "Beneficence," address the overlapping applications of autonomy, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. "Respect for Persons" refers to: "at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection" (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) -- a seemingly simple, but extraordinarily important concern--a research participant's right to choose voluntarily whether he or she wants to participate in the research after being adequately informed of what it entails (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The Belmont Report and NASW Code of Ethics

<u>The Belmont Report Principles and Related Applications</u>	<u>Related NASW Code of Ethics: Core Values, Ethical Principles, and Ethical Standards</u>
I. Respect for Persons	Core Social Work Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the dignity and worth of the person Ethical Standard 1: Social Workers' Ethical Responsibility to Clients
A. Autonomy 1) Right to self determination	Ethical Standards: 1.02 Self-Determination 1.03 Informed Consent 1.07 Privacy and Confidentiality 5.02 Evaluation and Research Sections e, f, g, and h
B. Informed consent 1) Information 2) Comprehension 3) Voluntariness	Ethical Standards: 5.02 Evaluation and Research Sections d, j, and l
II. Beneficence	Core Social Work Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the dignity and worth of the person
A. Risk versus benefits 1) Types of harm a) Psychological b) Physical c) Legal d) Social e) Economic	Ethical Standards: 1.4 Competence (Section c) 5.02 Evaluation and Research Sections d and j
III. Justice	Core Social Work Value: Social Justice Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice
A. Selection of subjects 1) Social justice a) role of social, racial, sexual, cultural biases	Ethical Standards: 5.02 Evaluation and Research Section d 6.04 Social and Political Action Sections a, b, c, and d

(NASW, 1999; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979)

Research participants' autonomy and informed consent fall under this heading. The NASW *Code of Ethics* addresses these as well under social work's core values of the "Dignity and Worth of the Person," the Ethical Principle: "Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person," and Ethical Standards 1.02, 1.03, 1.07, and 5.02 (sections d, e, f, g, h, j, and l) (see <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp> for copy of *Code*).

The Belmont Report defines an autonomous person as: “. . . an individual capable of deliberation about personal goals and of acting under the direction of such deliberation.” This addresses a person’s right to self-determination, which is echoed in NASW Ethical Standard 1.02. In addition, these principles address the protection of those who are not capable of self-determination and are unable to make autonomous decisions for themselves.

The second principle, beneficence, refers to: (a) “do no harm” and (b) “maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms.” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The NASW *Code of Ethics* also addresses beneficence specifically in Ethical Standard 5.02(j) which states: “Social workers engaged in evaluation or research should protect participants from unwarranted physical or mental distress, harm, danger, or deprivation.” (NASW, 1999).

All psychological and social research has the potential to harm participants (Labott & Johnson, 2004). Psychological risks include depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, embarrassment, frustration, inconvenience, getting information about oneself that is unpleasant and may cause alterations in self-concept, fear, an increase in mistrust of others, or at a minimum, inconvenience. Social risks may include issues related to stigma or effects of participation on those in the participant’s social network (Sieber, 2000).

In the IRB cost/benefit analysis of research, there are two areas of risk to consider: harm from direct participation and harm from a breach of confidentiality (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). Kraut et al. (2004) believe that participants’ potential risk in online research is low and may, in some instances, be less risky than face-to-face studies. Possible risks remain essentially the same; however, the ability of researchers to determine if a subject is being harmed is reduced in an online venue.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

These terms are often confused. Anonymity in a research study refers to ensuring that data used cannot be traced back to a particular individual or other unit of analysis. A research participant is anonymous when: “. . . the researcher cannot identify a given response with a given respondent” (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, p. 78). Confidentiality refers to the process of protecting a research subject’s identity during and after the study. A research participant’s data are confidential when: “. . . the researcher is able to identify a given person’s responses but essentially promises not to do so publicly” (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, p. 79). The NASW *Code of Ethics* addresses anonymity and

confidentiality related to research and evaluation specifically in Ethical Standard 5.02 (l) and (m) (NASW, 1999).

Online research has unique anonymity and confidentiality issues. Kraut et al. (2004) state that “. . . the greatest risk associated with online research centers on breaches of confidentiality, in which private, identifiable information is disclosed outside of the research context” (p. 112). Breaches of confidentiality include linking subjects’ responses to an identifier, use of direct quotations that may allow for identification of the poster (including those using pseudonyms), ability to trace a poster’s e-mail address and/or identity, and lack of security, which could result in unauthorized viewing of data (Flicker, Haans, & Skinner, 2004; Frankel & Siang, 1999). Legally, online postings may be considered public domain, but the broader issues of what constitutes ethical and responsible use of someone’s posting should be weighed. Online researchers cannot be 100% sure that text used cannot be traced back to the originator (Kling et al., 1999) and should not make claims to the contrary. The confidentiality of online data, like all research data, exists to the “limit of the law” and could be breached by a legal subpoena. Researchers have no protection from litigation related to these issues.

King (1996) cautions that it is crucial to protect the anonymity of those connected to the material being used to prevent feelings of violation, a reduction in intimacy and safety of that site, and impairment of the interpersonal dynamics of the group. Other ways to promote anonymity and confidentiality include contacting a site’s moderator for information, building procedures into the research design that decrease the risks of participant identification, such as stripping e-mail addresses, using a chain remailing service to disguise IP addresses, and/or changing names and pseudonyms. Flicker, Haans, and Skinner (2004) included a link to their online project’s privacy statement that explained the research and what was done with data. Posters selected an online nickname and were never asked for their real names. Researchers monitored sites on a daily basis and edited messages that might contain a possible identifier, such as last name or e-mail addresses. Data were stored in a locked office. Finally, all data were password protected and only available to the research team.

Social workers are no strangers to vulnerable populations and have skills that can help identify possible vulnerability in those with whom they work. However, this becomes more difficult without face-to-face contact. Examples of ways to address possible online vulnerability include using language in an informed consent that clearly specifies possible risks to participation,

assessing the level of vulnerability of the group topic as well as group members prior to its use, weighing the benefits versus the risks before using the data, and being aware of and including available resources if needed for a referral to services (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Flicker, et al., 2004).

### **Autonomy and Informed Consent**

Informed consent involves the ability of persons to choose what they want to happen to them to the best of their capabilities. There are three necessary elements for informed consent: (a) information to ensure an understanding of what is involved in the research, which includes disclosure of possible risks involved, (b) comprehension of the information that is presented, and (c) voluntariness where there is no coercion and/or undue influence to participate (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). A research participant's autonomy is diminished without adequate informed consent.

NASW's *Code of Ethics* addresses autonomy and informed consent under Ethical Standards 1.02, 1.03, and 1.07, and 5.02 (sections e, f, g, and h), as well as under the core social work value of dignity and worth of the person and Ethical Principle "Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person" (NASW, 1999).

Online research has the same issues as traditional research in these two areas. However, because researcher and participant are not face to face, consent issues on the Internet are more complex and include: (a) Is informed consent required? (b) How can it be obtained? and (c) How can it be validated? (Frankel & Siang, 1999, p. 7).

The first question requires distinguishing between the public and the private domains. Postings on discussion boards, listservs, or chat rooms are available to anyone who chooses to access that particular site. Those who participate in that online group are usually aware of the public nature of their postings via warnings from the server agency (Finn, 1999). IRB's may use this argument and may not require informed consent. However, those participating in forums which focus on sensitive topics may have an expectation of anonymity and privacy and suffer greater costs if these are violated. For example, perceived anonymity is often mentioned as an attractive feature of "cybersex" activities (Binik, Mah, & Kiesler, 1999; Griffiths, 2001). If there is an expectation of privacy due to a particular site's posted membership policies or the sensitivity of the group's topic(s), this may be a reason for an IRB to require informed consent.

If a discussion group participant reads his or her words in a published article, or if that group can be identified from quotes used without permission (such as in Finn and Lavitt, 1994), there is a risk of harm, especially when the forum involves a sensitive topic such as HIV or mental illness. A researcher's presence can damage the trust formed in a group (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004) and actually contribute to the forum's demise (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; King, 1996; Reid, 2003). Online group members may not be comfortable knowing that a researcher is lurking in their group and may have responses such as feeling intruded upon, feeling as if the researcher is being voyeuristic, and that their online environment is no longer safe (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

Finally, if a researcher joins a discussion group to mine data, and does not meet the posted profile of users of the group, this is an act of deception and violates the autonomy and dignity of persons in that group. From the utilitarian perspective, this must be considered among the costs of the research. From the deontological and an ethics of care perspective, it might be argued that such deception is not acceptable. The responsible conduct of research goes beyond these perspectives and needs to be considered when deciding methodology.

Online surveys also present issues related to informed consent, as well as anonymity and confidentiality. As noted in the "Use of the Internet and Social Work" section, online surveys have a number of ways they can deal with informed consent. However, there is no way to tell for sure whether survey respondents read and understand the online consent, use the resource referrals provided if there is a problem, or actually meet the study criteria. Some researchers provide a code to those who want to participate through a different medium such as e-mail and are better able to obtain informed consent prior to respondents taking the survey.

Ways to ensure that research subjects are protected include: (a) using an informed consent prior to collecting data; (b) getting permission to enter the group from the site administrator and/or participants; (c) being vigilant of possible issues and intervening (e.g., referral to resources such as an agency, organization, or Web site) as soon as possible; (d) getting consent from the poster to use quotes; (e) removing all possible identifiers, such as the communication's headers and signatures, names, and pseudonyms; (f) making no reference to the type of communication, the location or type of forum; and (g) storing data in a safe manner (King, 1996; Sharf, 1999).

### **Justice/Social Justice**

The third ethical principle found in The Belmont Report is "Justice." This principle can be found in social work's core value of social justice, the Ethical Principle that "Social workers

challenge social injustice,” and Ethical Standards 5.02 (section d), and 6.04 (sections a, b, c, and d) (NASW, 1999).

In *The Belmont Report*, examples of research done on prisoners in Nazi concentration camps and the Tuskegee syphilis study illustrate how the burden of the research fell on the most vulnerable while the benefits of improved medical care went to those more advantaged (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Issues related to applying the justice principle to online research include being able to identify risks and benefits of the research, anonymity of those participating, making it difficult to distribute the rewards (e.g., cash or other incentives), and the constant turnover among users of the site (Frankel & Siang, 1999).

The “digital divide” in which computer access is dependent on socioeconomic and environmental resources (Krumme, n.d.) has been a topic of discussion since the Internet began. It can be argued that most people in the United States have access to the Internet in their households, libraries, and schools (Martin, 2003). However, the digital divide may be more aptly termed “digital inequality” meaning there is a difference between those who have full access and have been educated in use of the Internet, and those who have only recently acquired limited access (Hargittai, 2003). In fact, many living persons in the U.S., such as older adults, will never go online. These issues make it difficult to know to whom and where the overall rewards of the research will go.

Consideration of justice invokes issues of *exclusion* as well as *inclusion* of a research participant. The notorious Tuskegee syphilis study (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) of non-treated indigent participants that generated knowledge benefiting the health of more affluent individuals is an example of unjust inclusion. However, CRF 45.46 requires justification of exclusion of certain groups. In a region with a substantial minority of disadvantaged non-English readers, is it just to administer an English-only survey to gauge adequate access to social services? Would an online survey yield an appropriate estimate of use of pre-natal care by disadvantaged women?

This principle may be salient for social work researchers, depending on their need to generalize findings beyond the online community they are studying. Care must be taken to design online research that does not violate the values of social justice, equity, and equality. Many persons served by social workers do not have equal access to the Internet. While there is merit to using

online data for particular populations, caution should be used when discussing the generalizability of the findings to such populations and biases should be acknowledged.

### **Competence in Social Work Practice**

Practice competence is a core social work value, ethical principle, and ethical standard in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (Ethical Standard 1.04(c), NASW, 1999). Social workers have been called technology phobic, unskilled in computer use, and behind the times regarding information technology (Giffords, 1998). However, social work researchers must be well grounded in Internet technology as well as Internet related policy to do research in this area (Marson & Brackin, 2000). Without an understanding of the technical components as well as limits of Internet technology, an online researcher will not have the knowledge needed to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and reduce risks to research subjects.

### **Conclusions**

The three basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report and the ethical standards and values of the *NASW Code of Ethics* have been applied to online research. Investigators need to consider possible differences in philosophy between an IRB committee and the researcher (utilitarian vs. deontological vs. ethics of care), issues of social justice and equity, and technological competence.

As Internet technology continues to evolve and as the numbers using the Internet increase worldwide, opportunities for online research will multiply. The third wave of information technology brings more complex privacy issues. These include concepts such as online identity, the public versus the private, the objectification of words on a screen, use of deception, and perceived anonymity. Training is crucial for those who desire to do research using online data. All players involved in this type of study who are responsible for conducting ethical research need to be aware of these and the continuing technological challenges.

The following recommendations are presented for those using online data:

- Recognize that you are conducting human subjects research and that you have an ethical responsibility to protect your research participants. This includes getting informed consent as needed.
- Be aware of your own approach/perspective of ethical decision making. If your perspective is more of an ethics of care approach and your IRB is strongly utilitarian, integrating these two approaches may facilitate approval from the Committee.
- Be aware of the aspects of your research that affect the potential for harm, such as:
  - ■ The source of Internet data

- ▪ The rules of the site
- ▪ The level of vulnerability of group participants
- ▪ The level of intrusiveness of the researcher's involvement
- ▪ The number of members of the group being studied (Eysenbach & Till, 2001)
  
- Be knowledgeable of ways you can reduce the threat of harm to your research subjects, such as:
  - ▪ When doing a survey or experimental research online, do not ask for identifying information (Kraut, et al., 2004).
  - ▪ If personal identifiers are necessary, record and store separately from research data (Kraut, et al., 2004).
  - ▪ Remove all identifying information within e-mail messages before storing data (e.g., names, pseudonyms, list names, names of newsgroups).
  - ▪ Make protection of privacy and anonymity a priority when storing data to ensure validity and reliability; change pseudonyms and disguise quoted materials (Kraut, et al., 2004; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001).
  - ▪ When debriefing is required, link materials to exiting of the site used (Kraut, et al., 2004).
  - ▪ Use data encryption when available for data transmission (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).
- Be knowledgeable of your server design for data security and make changes to ensure data is not vulnerable to outside access (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenward, 2002).
- Weigh the risks versus the benefits of researcher disclosure when entering certain online venues, such as chat rooms and online groups, to reduce risks to the group itself as well as group process (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004; Reid, 2004).
- Be sure that online communication is the best source of data for your study. In particular, be sensitive to the social justice issues of equality and equity.
- Be knowledgeable about the Internet technology that you are using and the ways it can both harm and protect your research participants.

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