

**RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE 2007 APA PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE ON  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE**

*(Disclaimer: In accordance with Association Rule 30-6.2, these recommendations do not constitute APA policy nor commit APA to the activities described therein)*

Both psychological researchers and institutional review boards (IRBs) are fundamentally committed to the protection of human participants in research and the scientific enterprise. Despite these shared commitments, perceived challenges to academic freedom and increasing regulatory burden have contributed to researcher-IRB tension.

The 2007 APA Presidential Task Force on Institutional Review Boards and Psychological Science was charged with identifying specific policies and practices that would assist IRBs and psychological scientists to reduce this tension. Members of the Task Force were: Thomas Eissenberg, PhD (Chair) (Virginia Commonwealth University), Monica Biernat, PhD (University of Kansas), Peter Finn, PhD (Indiana University at Bloomington), Daniel Ilgen, PhD (Michigan State University), Barbara Stanley, PhD (Columbia University & John Jay College, CUNY), and Scyatta Wallace, PhD (SUNY Downstate Medical Center). Sangeeta Panicker, PhD (APA Science Directorate) served as the staff liaison.

Over the last several years, for a variety of reasons, human participant research has been under intense scrutiny, and many IRBs have responded by broadening the scope of the review and introducing more complex and detailed requirements for protocol submission and review. Often the broader scope and increased complexity and detail seem to add little or nothing to research participant protections in the behavioral and social sciences. It has been described as “mission creep” (Gunsalus, et al., 2006) and a violation of academic freedom (American Association of University Professors, 2006), particularly as it impacts on the behavioral and social sciences. Thus, this response has challenged what should be a collaborative relationship between IRBs and psychological scientists who conduct human participant research. It has also increased the potential for conflict between IRBs and psychological scientists who share the common goals of protecting research participants and promoting sound science. Key areas for potential conflict

include researchers' perception that IRBs needlessly use complex biomedical review procedures that slow or sometimes stop safe and ethical psychological research, that IRBs do not understand and sometimes overestimate the generally minimal risk of some psychological research, and that IRBs might be better informed about safe and ethical research methods involving vulnerable populations and/or nontraditional research settings.

The Presidential Task Force on IRBs and Psychological Science resolved that APA has a unique opportunity to reduce this tension by enhancing collaboration between IRBs and psychologists. This includes empowering researchers to engage with their IRBs, helping IRBs understand psychological science, and working together to develop evidence-based policy and procedures. To maximize APA's influence, and based on a thorough review of research in this area, the Task Force presents four specific recommendations and has submitted a proposal for a series of four peer-reviewed scholarly articles that addresses issues of immediate relevance including, models for streamlining the review process, assessment of risks in behavioral and psychological research, and research with vulnerable populations. The articles will review applications of psychological science to such areas as risk assessment and decision-making in the IRB context.

## **Recommendations**

**Continuing Committee:** APA should establish a continuing committee on ethical conduct in research with human participants. The issues pertaining to human research protections are continually evolving and require ongoing and focused attention by experts within psychology. For example, in late 2007, the Department of Health and Human Services Office for Human Research Protections published a call for comments on a proposal for new regulations for research with individuals with compromised decision-making capacity. Also, legislation addressing human research protections has been introduced in Congress in recent years. A continuing APA committee, which would complement APA's Committee on Animal Research and Ethics, could develop, oversee, and evaluate APA activities with regard to education, outreach, and advocacy for collaborative interactions between IRB and psychological scientists. In addition, the continuing committee could develop guidance and resources to assist researchers

who have experienced difficulties in navigating the route from proposal to implementation of their research at their individual institutions.

**Education:** Training the next generation of psychological scientists to maximize collaborative relationships between them and their IRB. Educational opportunities include:

- Workshops at Convention that focus on regulation-based requirements for human research protections and institutional policies, provide guidance on sensitive and/or complex issues such as deception in research, community-based research, research among people with low literacy, assessment of capacity to consent, etc.
- Modules on specific topics such as ethics of research with humans, explaining federal regulations, preparing an IRB application, developing consent forms, de-identifying data, ethical issues that arise in different types of research (research with minors, prisoners, students, culturally diverse people and linguistic minorities, research on “sensitive” topics) etc., that could be incorporated into pre- and post-doctoral education
- Training institutes for early career psychologists that focus on specific topics (e.g., risk assessment, privacy & confidentiality issues, etc.) in human participant research within a broader context of responsible conduct of research (RCR)

**Outreach:** Serve as a resource for psychologists and IRBs as they interact with each other collaboratively. APA could become “the” source to turn to when a) researchers have questions about how best to address an ethical issue in their research, and b) IRBs have questions about a procedure or approach outlined in psychological science applications.

1. Provide psychologists employed in universities with tools to help them address concerns raised by working with IRBs, for example, through a web-based Q & A forum.
2. Provide psychologists employed in non-traditional settings (e.g., medical schools, community centers, self-employed) with tools and resources to navigate the IRB system.
3. Provide IRB members and administrators with tools to help them address concerns raised by working with psychological scientists. For example, collaboration with organizations like Public Responsibility in Medicine & Research (PRIM&R) could lead to the

development of workshops on topics such as risk assessment, risk-benefit analyses, and methodologies in behavioral and psychological research.

**Advocacy:** Collaborative IRB/psychologist relationships may be enhanced by evidence-based IRB policy at the local and national levels. Thus, APA can strengthen its advocacy efforts to include federal and other funding streams that support research aimed at developing and evaluating improvements in IRB policy and procedures that facilitate safe and ethical research while minimizing regulatory burden. These policies and procedures might gain national support if APA also strengthened its advocacy for psychologists' representation at regulatory agencies (e.g., Office for Human Research Protections) and affiliated groups (e.g., DHHS Secretary's Advisory Committee on Human Research Protections).

## References

American Association of University Professors. (2006). Research on human subjects: Academic freedom and institutional review boards. Accessed February 7, 2008 at <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/A/humansubs.htm>

Gunsalus, C. K., Bruner, E., Burbules, N., Dash, L. D., Finkin, M. W., Goldberg, J., Greenough, W., Miller, G. & Pratt, M. G. (2006). The Illinois White Paper - Improving the System for Protecting Human Subjects: Counteracting IRB Mission Creep. University of Illinois Law & Economics Research Paper No. LE06-016. Accessed February 7, 2008 at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=902995>