

Committee on Human Research (CHR) 2020 Annual Report

Committee Members

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Ethical Issues in Research Using Mobile, Pervasive-sensing, Imaging, and other Digital Technologies

The Committee initiated a broad multi-pronged initiative to explore the ethical ramifications of ubiquitous digital technology use in everyday life and the increasing use of these technologies in research. Projects include:

- Raising awareness about this complex issue within the behavioral and psychological science community. To achieve this goal, the Committee developed a proposal for a special issue of a journal, which will feature articles exploring the ethical, legal, regulatory, and social issues associated with the increased use of digital technologies in behavioral health research.
- Exploring the impact of digital technologies in research on key regulatory concepts such as minimal risk. Traditionally, the bulk of behavioral, cognitive, and psychological research has met the regulatory definition of “minimal risk.” This has been true of both laboratory-based and field-based research. Qualifying for a “minimal risk” determination does not merely mean a more efficient and less onerous institutional review board (IRB) approval process, but it also has ramifications for the integrity of the study. For example, often the regulatory requirement to obtain informed consent from prospective participants has to be waived in order to ensure validity of the data obtained. However, one principle criterion for waiving informed consent is that the IRB determines that the research poses minimal (or less than) risk of harm to the participants. Thus it is crucial for the determination of level of risk be as accurate as possible. This project will explore if and how the ubiquity of digital technologies has influenced the meaning and determination of risks of harm in research.
- Seeking funding to convene an interdisciplinary group of experts including behavioral scientists, ethicists, institutional review board (IRB) members, experts in the design and use of various digital technology platforms to develop a consensus statement on if and how the prevailing ethical framework for research with human participants, as elucidated in the Belmont Report relevant in today’s digital world?

Newly Revised Regulations for Research with Human Participants

The revised Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (also known as the Common Rule) went into full effect in January 2020. To assess the impact of the revised regulations on behavioral, cognitive, and psychological scientists who conduct research with human participants, as well as institutional review boards that review such research, the Committee designed an online survey that will be conducted in 2021. The results of the survey will position APA to advocate for federal guidance that will enable IRBs to more judiciously interpret and implement the new requirements of the Common Rule, to both support scientifically valid behavioral, cognitive, and psychological research as well as protect the rights and welfare of research participants. The survey results could also inform APA efforts to develop educational resources to help researchers comply with regulatory requirements efficiently.

Impact on APA's Strategic Priorities

These CHR projects strengthen APA's standing as an authoritative voice for psychology and prepares the discipline and profession of psychology for the future.