

# **An Evaluation of the Computer-Mediated Communication Research Ethics Debate**

Lois Ann Scheidt

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## **Introduction**

The debate over ethical paradigms for human subject protection in both research methodology and reporting of research findings, has raged in recent years. During these discussions notorious examples of human subject abuse, mistreatment, and/or misrepresentation are often cited - the Tuskegee Syphilis Study<sup>1</sup>, Milgram's electroshock experiments (1974), and the Stanford Prison Experiment<sup>2</sup>. These studies show the depth of harm that can be inflicted, knowingly or unknowingly, on human research subjects.

In a developing field such as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) the debate is begun anew. Various authors have discussed the application and adaptation of existing ethical models and codes to CMC research, including King (1996) American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines (1992), Herring (1996) linguistics research practices, and Boehlefeld (1996) the Association of Computing Machinery (ACM) Ethics Statement (1992). These authors agree that part or all of these existing ethical statements can be adapted to CMC research. But are existing ethical paradigms transferable to the new medium of CMC and to the investigative processes utilized by CMC researchers?

In Hudson, Bruckman, Ess, and Herring (2001), Bruckman states, "ethical standards developed for existing media don't necessarily translate well to situations created by new media forms." (pg. 1) Reid (1996) found that (Reid, 1994), the level of informed consent she had solicited from JennyMUSH (a pseudonym) participants and administration was not enough to protect the space and it's participants from harm due to introduction of other researchers, following the publication of Reid's thesis online. Ethical failures such as the Rimm Cyberporn Study<sup>3</sup> certainly lend credence to the discussion that existing guidelines and ethical statements are not applicable to research on the Internet environment. Or is bad research, bad research whatever the venue?

In reviewing literature surrounding the continuing discussion of CMC Research Ethics, two primary ideological camps emerge; those that believe subject's perceived privacy must be maintained, and those that subscribe to do no harm.

This paper defines these two ethical perspectives and then applies them separately to the research methodology and reporting of research findings from the Bechar-Isreali's (1995) paper "From < Bonehead> to < cLoNehEAd>: Nicknames, Play, and Identity on Internet Relay Chat". Finally I will review the two analyses and present a perspective in light of my own CMC research.

### **Perceived Privacy Defined**

King (1996) argues that by virtue of participants posting messages from the privacy of their homes and workspaces, engendering a false sense of privacy, they constitute a special population. Because of their "Perceived Privacy" as a special population, extra effort must be used to protect the subjects. King recommends that the subjects names/nicknames and anonymous online identities should be eliminated or pseudonymized, discourse should not be reprinted without prior permission from the subject, references to the location and time of the postings should be removed, researchers must take additional precautions in garnering informed consent from subjects, additional consideration should be taken to protect the individual and/or group from the feeling they have been deceived, and researchers should be cognizant of the feeling of invasion subjects may feel at the presence of a researcher in their group.

Waskul and Douglass (1996) extend King's argument to include the concept that CMC environments include features of both public and private communication and promote a perceived sense of privacy through the invisible combination of those features. To evaluate this the researcher must place themselves in the subject's place and think about their perception of personal privacy in the research situation. They recommend that researchers should consider the size of the forum, the nature of the group, and the intrusiveness of the study in assessing the degree of perceived privacy by their participants. Finally they remind the researcher to place the interests of the subjects "above and beyond the aims and goals of the researcher." (pg. 138)

In Hudson et al. (2001), Bruckman defines their position, as having a right to privacy and human dignity demands the right not to be a research subject unless they freely give informed consent to the research. Additionally in Saunders (2000), Bruckman is cited as having stated the researcher should use "analogy and genre to define possible ethical issues." (pg. 3) Finally Bruckman is cited in both Olsen (1999) and On Line (1999) discussing the level of reality ascribed to participant pseudonyms by their creators. Bruckman states researchers must apply the same rules of confidentiality to these creations as would be afforded to subject's real names.

Finally the points outlined above are codified in the bulleted lists Research and Education, and Action Agendas found in Frankel & Siang (1999). Bruckman and King as workshop speakers were undoubtedly influential in the development of both of these agendas.

### **Do No Harm Defined**

Thomas (1996b) argues the existing ethical frameworks can be applied to the Internet to prevent ethical lapses like those found in the Rimm Cyberporn Study. In reviewing the Rimm methodology and administrative processes, Thomas found multiple levels of gatekeeping existed at which the application of existing research guidelines and ethical principles could have identified and corrected the numerous lapses of research ethics. In the Introduction (Thomas, 1996a) to *The Information Society* special issue dealing with cyberspace ethics, they summarize the points as "three basic guidelines are sufficient to guide us in doing right: Never put our subjects at risk, never lie to them, and minimize social harm while enhancing social good." (pg. 116)

Herring (1996) points out the means for protecting research subject's privacy is already available. The researcher has the ability to assess the technical distinction between open- and restricted-access groups. Most multi-site CMC channels, MUDs, MOOs, chat spaces, Listserv groups, Usenet messages, etc can be openly declared public. Private channels such as Listserv groups that require approval to join, invitation-only spaces, or private rooms found in chat spaces, MUDs, and MOOs, etc., require a higher level of protection. Herring differentiates public interaction as "repeatable for any reasonable and nonmalicious purpose," while private interactions "should not be repeated outside the group without explicit permission from the sources involved." (pg. 166) In Hudson et al., (2001), Herring states researchers "have a moral responsibility to take reasonable precautions to avoid harming the people whose communication they study." (pg. 2)

Suler (2000), like King (1996), points to The Ethical Standards of the American Psychological Association (1992) for the chapter's core argument. Suler finds the Standards provide exception from informed consent for anonymous questionnaires, and naturalistic observations. Additionally the Standard states that deceiving subjects should only occur when the study's prospective scientific, education, or applied value is great and when equally effective alternative procedures are not feasible. "I think that when a researcher emphasizes the importance of making a helpful contribution to the person or group being studied, many - if not all - of the other ethical responsibilities are fulfilled." (pg. 6) Suler contends that one way make a helpful contribution is to

write articles that will be valuable not only to the social science community to but to the researched community as well.

## **Research Methodology**

The Bechar-Israeli (1995) paper "From to : Nicknames, Play, and Identity on Internet Relay Chat" was selected for this analysis as it reflects many of the issues illustrated by recent ethics authors on both sides of this discussion. Bechar-Israeli logged posts during two weeks in April 1994, as part of their one-year field research in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels as a participant observer. IRC is a public channel, which requires only the equipment and proper programs to gain access to the network. Bechar-Israeli utilized posts from various IRC channels, including #NICECAFE, #IRCbar, #Truthdare, and #30plus.

#NICECAFE: a virtual coffee shop, where people discuss issues, usually light and cheerful topics.

#IRCbar: a bar where people "drink" and talk about under the sun (in original). The topics are usually light.

#Truthdare: a channel where people play "truth or dare". Each participant in turn gives information about him/herself: sex, age, location, sexual preferences (heterosexual, homosexual), and any other information s/he desires to reveal. The "victim" is then asked a personal question, usually a very intimate question, and s/he must answer in detail. After answering s/he can then choose a new "victim" and ask a question.

#30plus: a channel attempting to attract people aged thirty and above. We of course can never definitely know participants' real age; however it is reasonable to assume that most are in that age group. The topics discussed vary. (pg. 12)

Content analysis was used to evaluate the nicknames from these accumulated posts. The data includes 260 nicknames primarily from subjects in the United States, Europe, and Israel. The complete list of nicknames studied is available as an appendix with the published paper. The body of the paper cites specific nicknames used on these channels as examples of the coding categories.

Additionally subjects were asked about the origin of their nicknames. During the questioning the researcher did not reveal they were a researcher or that they studying nicknames. The subjects accepted the question "as part of the normal getting-acquainted process on IRC." (pg. 12) Sections of intact IRC logs are reprinted, including nicknames and text, to show nickname used as parts of social games, the effect of nickname loses, and play with identities online.

### **Perceived Privacy Applied**

In applying the Perceived Privacy perspective the structure of the basic data acquisition and analysis, utilizing participant observer and content analysis, would be unchanged in Bechar-Israeli (1995). However the published paper would be substantially different.

The application of King (1996), Waskul and Douglass (1996), and Buckman (Hudson et al., 2001, Olsen, 1999, and On Line, 1999) would eliminate or pseudonymize all locations, identifying material, and nicknames before publication. The complete listing of nicknames utilized for the study would not have been provided for the reader in an appendix.

Under the Perceived Privacy perspective subjects would have been asked for their informed consent prior to the study. Clearly all subjects would have been aware of the researchers status as a researcher, as well as the primary focus of the research project. Only those subjects that chose to be part of the project would have been interviewed on the origin of their nicknames. The subjects involved, prior to publication, would have reviewed quotes from those interviews. Subjects would have had final editing approval and could have requested quotes be removed or amended, at their discretion.

### **Do No Harm Applied**

In applying the Do No Harm perspective the structure of the basic data acquisition and analysis, utilizing participant observer and content analysis in Bechar-Israeli (1995), would be unchanged. The published paper would vary somewhat from the existing form.

The application of Thomas (1996a and 1996b), Herring (1996 and 2001), and Suler (2000) would have evaluated the status of each channel in deciding what information was public and what should be considered private. As the IRC channels in question are publicly available with no entrance restrictions, the level of privacy for publicly posted communication in those spaces would have been limited. Though the level of information each of these authors would give

about the channels would differ, Herring (1996) protects the anonymity of research subjects and study locations as a convention of linguistic research in both terrestrial and cyberspace locations. Suler (1996) has used the actual location names and nicknames of participants in the chat spaces researched. It is doubtful these authors would have provided the complete listing of nicknames utilized for the study in an appendix.

The sections of intact IRC logs reprinted in the paper including examples of nicknames and text would have been maintained though the complete location and time identifiers would have varied as described above. The text is lighthearted banter showing nicknames used as parts of social games, the effect of nickname losses, and play with individual identities online and as such would have been maintained.

In my research on publicly available adolescent chat spaces I too grapple with the ethics surrounding the use of human subjects in research. Therefore I have chosen to disguise the names of the chat spaces to protect this vulnerable population of teenagers. Though I admit this makes my research less replicable.

### **Perspective**

Like Bechar-Israeli I have done research with nickname choice in my target population, (Scheidt, 2001). As such I did not pseudonymize already anonymous nicknames. I agree with Bechar-Israeli's finding that subjects do strongly identify with their created identities online, however by pseudonymizing nicknames I believe I would be creating three further ethical dilemmas: 1) I cannot guarantee the pseudonym chosen truly protects the subjects actual privacy, 2) I cannot guarantee the "created" pseudonym does not invade the privacy of others outside the data corpus, and 3) The replicability and reliability of the study would be further compromised.

Within the chat spaces I study, adolescents freely and regularly change their nicknames, adopting and adapting nicknames on a whim then changing them quickly or hanging onto them for longer periods. Therefore a non-pseudonymized nickname may well no longer be in use by the subject at the time a research project is completed, and a new participant may have adopted the old nickname. Likewise there is no guarantee the subject, or another participant in the chat space, will not have adopted the pseudonymized nickname as their online identity. To be of use to the social science research community pseudonymized nicknames would need to be very close to the original in tone, subject matter, type style, etc., thereby making the new pseudonym a likely candidate for use within the chat space.

I find the "special population" argument, posed by King (1996), to be paternalistic. As a researcher I am involved in my research environment as a participant observer, but I am still hesitant to use my interpretation of another human being's perception of their perceived personal privacy on the net to gauge how invasive my research will be to their perception of privacy. While various ethics systems do ask researchers to evaluate the potential risk to the research group, these systems fail if applied to a single individual rather than to a group. Biomedical experiments have long utilized detailed subject selection processes designed to minimize risk to both the subject and the methodology of the project. These selection processes are not flawless and subjects are informed of potential risks. Though even with informed consent and detail selection processes human subjects are harmed.

The "special population" argument, as applied to CMC research, assumes that the vast majority of research projects pose more than average risk to predominate amount of subjects, elevating CMC research to the level of biomedical research processes. I contend, however, that the level of risk most CMC research subjects face is not equivalent to those experienced in biomedical experimental subjects.

In my current research I work with a true special population as defined by both the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (Federal Register, 1991) and The Belmont Report (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1997) and afford them the higher level of consideration required for researchers working with this and similar groups. However should future research projects take me away from adolescents and into the realm of adult research, I would agree with the Do No Harm advocates and Waskul and Douglass (1996), the privacy of the channel and the stated topic should be the guiding force in defining how much protection to afford the subject group.

King (1996) and Bruckman (Hudson et al., 2001, Olsen, 1999, and On Line, 1999) hold that full disclosure and informed consent from each individual impacted by the study is a basic requirement, I find this to be a flawed argument as well. Methodologies such as naturalistic observation and participant observer/ethnography have long been utilized as part of the tool chest in a variety of disciplines. Basic research methodological development demands the researcher must evaluate the impact of the methodology on the research group. These evaluations have been made through many disciplines, including those whose ethics statements have already been discussed.

## **Conclusion**

Though it is tempting to say new technologies require new ethical statements, Thomas (1996b) points out this "would require a litany of rules and principles that would lead us to a futile exercise in perpetual rule construction." (pg. 197) Rather it is best to conceptualize the new technologies in light of previous ethical constructs and remember the long-standing conundrums that exist between academic disciplines and other research entities such as journalists. Best to apply those existing constructs in a logical and sensible manner. Thomas' Golden Rule "(1) Never deceive subjects; (2) never knowingly put subjects at risk; and (3) maximize public and private good while minimizing harm." (pg. 197)

## **End Notes**

1. Links to further information are available at "Internet Resources on the Tuskegee Study."  
<http://www.gpc.peachnet.edu/~shale/humanities/composition/assignments/experiment/tuskegee.html>
2. Further information is available at "Stanford Prison Experiment."  
<http://www.prisonexp.org/>
3. Links to further information are available at "EFF 'Censorship - Martin Rimm/CMU/Time & Related Anti-Porn Hysteria' Archive."  
[http://www.eff.org/Censorship/Rimm\\_CMU\\_Time/](http://www.eff.org/Censorship/Rimm_CMU_Time/)

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