Published in final edited form as:

Perspect Psychol Sci. 2009 January ; 4(1): 30–31. doi:10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01085.x.

Institutional Review Boards: From Bane to Boon

Susan T. Fiske [Eugene Higgins Professor]

Department of Psychology, Green Hall, Princeton University, Princeton NJ 08540

Keywords

Institutional Review Boards; ethics review; prevention focus; promotion focus

Judging from convention sessions, list-serve debates, and coffee-maker conversations, Institutional Review Boards are the bane of our research. But few of us would advocate going back to the bad old days before any kind of ethics review. This ambivalence haunts many of us as researchers. Being of two minds about IRBs foreshadows some suggestions for improving them, based on my experiences as a sometimes-frustrated researcher and as a sometimes-satisfied IRB member, both roles dating back to graduate school. As Chair of Princeton's Institutional Review Panel, I have observed at least one IRB that works well, based on two principles, with several implications for improving researcher-IRB transactions.

The first principle is that IRBs doubtless must protect human subjects; they help to prevent unethical, unwarranted, intrusive, and damaging treatment of our research participants. This prevention function reasonably reflects most researchers' and members' expectations about the IRB's role. Following the federal regulations, as interpreted by a particular board, and as informed by precedents, has many salutary effects, among others: Researchers think about the ethical trade-offs in their methods; participants know the procedures have been reviewed by neutral third-parties; a given research community develops norms that safeguard the process; and research universities are protected from having their research enterprise shut down. All these IRB roles in prevention are evident.

However, we can go beyond the prevention function of IRBs, to the benefit of everyone involved. Drawing on Higgins's useful theory of regulatory focus (e.g., 1997), we can expand this prevention principle to encourage IRBs to consider a promotion function. The regulatory focus theory species two types of control functions, one prevention-oriented and the other promotion-oriented. Prevention focus concerns the presence or absence of negative outcomes. The usual IRB prevention focus predicts that IRBs focusing solely on avoiding unethical research will orient toward control, risk-aversion, security, detail-orientation, reactivity, anxiety, avoidance, punishment, negative possibilities, and seizing on a single dominant solution. Researchers who view IRBs as small minded, rule-oriented, rigid, and authoritarian might recognize this portrait. But they might also appreciate the safety, predictability, and protection inherent in a prevention-focused IRB. The University's research program is unlikely to be shut down if the IRB fulfills its prevention-focused role, and that of course is the primary pragmatic rationale for IRBs.

But a University's research can shut down also if the researchers stop researching. What IRBs usually fail to consider is that the University's research can cease if the researchers become so frustrated with the local logistics that they all leave or give up. The typical prevention-focused interpretation of the IRB fails to consider this alternative scenario. IRBs have a responsibility to prevent unethical research, but they also have an ethical responsibility not to prevent research that might improve the human condition. Ethically, they should promote beneficial research.

One way to improve psychology would be to educate IRBs about promotion focus as a regulatory concern. Thus, the second principle of an IRB is promoting research. A promotion focus entails the complementary focus on the presence or absence of positive outcomes, in this case, the efficient and effective facilitation of research. Promotion focus regulates, but what it regulates are possibilities, accomplishments, aspirations, rewards, risk tolerance, creativity, big-picture orientation, considered decision-making, approach, positive future possibilities, entertaining multiple alternatives, and disappointment at failure. This may not sound like any IRB of anyone's typical experience, but it remains entirely possible, taking as part of its mission the encouragement of research by facilitating reasonable human subjects review. A promotion-focused IRB follows several constructive strategies.

- *Recruitment and training of staff.* Support staff need to know their dual function of preventing ethical disasters but also promoting faculty and student research. This encourages a service orientation instead of merely a policing function.
- *Recruitment of faculty members.* Few faculty relish university service. Recruiting processes can emphasize facilitating beneficial research as well as preventing ethical violations. Department chairs can understand that their field's research needs to be represented on the Board, and this motivates them to recruit faculty who serve that role.
- *Educating members.* Research norms differ wildly across even the social and behavioral sciences. Ensuring representation on the panel of various disciplinary perspectives allows members to educate each other about established procedures and their safety records.
- *Orienting new members.* People have many misconceptions about the IRB's role. Learning by observing before taking on the review process helps. So does the IRB being explicit about the dual roles of prevention and promotion focus.
- *Reinforcing boundaries.* Many IRBs suffer from mission creep, expanding into unwanted roles as proofreaders, methodological consultants, evaluators of creativity, or guardians against researchers putting themselves at risk. Clearly, if any of these factors is off-the-scale egregious, then the costs to society are higher than the benefits of the research. But most of the time, mission creep entails more mundane, less serious issues. Mostly, IRBs too easily allow themselves to slip over the boundaries of their proper mission on tangential issues that are not part of their job description.
- *Establishing reasonable norms.* Within the federal regulations, IRBs establish local norms; this is a social process, developing consensus, allowing all voices to speak, developing precedents. IRB meetings can allow all reasonable discomfort to be aired and still reach a consensus. The key is reasonable compromise and fair precedent.
- *Separating medical and psychological research.* Few psychology studies risk killing someone. The expertise and ethical considerations differ tremendously in

behavioral versus medical research. For these reasons, universities would best protect participants and promote research by creating separate IRBs.

- *Educating researchers.* Creating checklists of the most frequent omissions and providing a decision tree for exempt and nonexempt research, as well as having a staff member available for consultation, can save everyone much time and frustration.
- *Outreach.* Having IRB members from various disciplinary backgrounds automatically creates a go-to person in each relevant department. Uncertainties can be locally resolved, and standard practices can be communicated by an IRB member who speaks the researcher's disciplinary language.
- *Ensuring timely, specific response.* Efficient minute-taking and notification is essential to promote research and to prevent researchers from circumventing the system. Adequate, motivated, promotion-focused staffing makes this possible.
- *Calibrating revisions.* Dealing efficiently with different levels of ethical issues promotes the research process. Some requested revisions are merely administrative, and between meetings, staff can manage these (e.g., a missing signature or certificate). Some revisions are minor, and the Chair can expedite approval of these revisions, also between meetings. Some revisions require reviewers' evaluations of the revisions but not the entire meeting's discussion. Still others do require rereview at the next meeting. And some rare cases entail proposals that require so much revision that a new submission is required. Knowing the difference at the meeting allows staff and members to facilitate research and to concentrate on the more complex (and interesting) ethical issues.
- *Encouraging inquiry.* Having the Chair and senior staff available for pre-submission consultation on novel ethical issues can facilitate creative work without holding it up unnecessarily. New technologies (e.g., virtual reality), new domains (e.g., web surveys), and new methods (e.g., fMRI) all can develop with the constructive collaboration of IRBs and researchers.

One advantage an IRB promotion focus—besides the more obvious prevention focus—is that researchers will cooperate more actively with the IRB, viewing it as a collaborative guide rather than an intransigent roadblock. IRBs work because researchers voluntarily submit honest accounts of their research methods. IRBs need cooperative, responsive researchers who help prevent ethics violations, and researchers need efficient, facilitative IRBs who help promote responsible research. Universities and psychology need both a prevention and a promotion focus in our IRB system.

Reference

1. Higgins ET. Beyond pleasure and pain. *American Psychologist*. 1997; 52:1280–1300. [PubMed: 9414606]