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Editorial

Introduction to special issue: ethical dilemmas in social network research

Toward the beginning of the article that leads off this special issue, Rebecca Goolsby recalls a short but intensive burst of messages on the SOCNET listserve[1] concerning the ethics of military funding of social-networks research. One of the postings, from Marya Doerfel, a young faculty member at Rutgers, particularly struck me.[2] An excerpt follows (reprinted here with the permission of the message's author):

> "[K]nowledge is powerful, and particularly so with information that we amass from conducting SNA [social network analysis]. So, where are the ethical considerations in our academic papers? Are there ethical publications like position pieces about our academic responsibility as SNA researchers, in particular?"

> "In sum, I guess my contribution is this—Do members of the SNA community include ethical discussions in their workshops, classrooms, and publications?"

I thought at the time, and still do, that this was an excellent set of questions, and moreover these were questions for which I as a teacher and practitioner of social network analysis had no extended answer. With the rare exception of isolated but important journal articles such as the one by Borgatti and Molina (2003, published subsequent to the listserve exchange), I knew of no place a graduate student might turn for the purpose of honing what Rebecca Goolsby calls in her article in this issue an ethical imagination relevant to social network research. And this was true not only for graduate students, but equally so for senior researchers, for whom ethical questions in areas ranging from AIDS research to networks within profit-making firms to analyses of national elites to work carrying direct military applications is becoming more and more salient. Indeed, as Charles Kadushin writes at the head of his article concluding this special issue, the social network field may have become a victim of its own success, with a greater ability to arrive at incisive analyses than to

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[1] SOCNET is a listserve maintained for the social networks community by the International Network for Social Network Analysis (INSNA). For more information on INSNA and SOCNET, go to http://www.insna.org/.

[2] Marya Doerfel is an assistant professor in Rutgers' School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies. The SOCNET posting of hers to which I refer is dated August 15, 2002.

comprehend the conditions for responsible uses of such analyses. We will need therefore to continue the existing efforts to gain clarity about ethical dilemmas in social network research, and this special journal issue is dedicated toward advancing such endeavors.

I set out to invite and publish a set of papers that could serve as a workable foundation for all of us who wish to have some basis of shared discussion and experience for thinking through the issues of ethics and social network analysis that increasingly concern us all. The experts I invited have succeeded admirably in fulfilling these hopes and expectations. I will briefly introduce each of the articles.

Toward the end of her article, Rebecca Goolsby writes that raising ethical concerns can take a bit of courage. She gives a cogent example from her own experience, resulting in one victory for the ethical imagination, which is a concept that pertains to a community that can be built in part by evolving shared ethical concerns and standards. As a Ph.D. anthropologist working in a military defense science and technology funding agency, and with a special interest in computational modeling including social network analysis, Goolsby understands ethics as a set of considerations that arise on a day-to-day basis while carrying on work that is consequential for international relations and security. She writes in particular for a readership of academic social scientists, who are intrigued by the opportunities provided by defense funding even as they seek to evaluate the ethical risks involved in accepting such funding. Among her points is that scientists working on social network analysis and related modeling areas need to "develop ethical guidelines and approaches to aid students and researchers in establishing a consensus of ethical principles suitable to the new technology and the new socio-political world in which we work". Her informed discussion should prove very useful to the efforts now under way within INSNA, the professional association for social network researchers, to establish a code of ethics for our community.[3]

Moving toward ethical guidelines for network research in organizations is the subject of the paper by Stephen P. Borgatti and José-Luis Molina. The authors focus on ethical problems that may often arise when research in organizations involves a *quid pro quo* that researchers give data or analyses to management. It may not be sufficient, the authors argue, to omit from the organizational network study those respondents who decline to consent to participate. Those who decline to participate might still be identified by co-workers as problematic (e.g., as involved in conflicts with others, or as unpopular), and these identifications could be perceived as well by managers controlling employee evaluations and salaries. Going further, even if those who decline to participate are eliminated as potential targets of choices (by the use of a restricted questionnaire roster), they might still be identified if management knows the names of all the employees included in the analysis. How then is it possible to take seriously the promise of informed consent, in such a way that individuals' rights are respected and the success of future network studies is not compromised

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by appropriately cynical future respondents (a concern also raised in Borgatti and Molina, 2003)?

In their article, in this special issue, Borgatti and Molina suggest possible solutions in the form of innovative research practices. And they argue that management itself should be a party to the consent form, with a "management disclosure contract" (MDC) signed by employer and researcher bundled in with the consent form offered to potential participants in the network study. They allude to the need for the development of new software that would allow individually tailored feedback to be provided to each respondent. And in appendixes the authors provide models of an MDC and of a "truly informed consent" (TIC) form that would provide specific steps toward addressing the problems that they have identified.

How to view the question of human subjects protection, in such a way as to advance effective control of infectious diseases by means of responsible research, is the subject of Alden Klovdahl's article in this special issue. On the one hand, researchers would benefit if they could help institutional review boards (IRBs) to comprehend the benefits of collecting identifying information about social network members, and Klovdahl (for example, in Figs. 1–3 of his article and in the related textual discussion) provides an effective means of illustrating the benefits. On the other hand, researchers should understand that the burden is on those proposing social network research to design and defend their planned studies so as to protect their subjects. A main focus of the author is the US federal rule known as the "Common Rule", which along with its evolving interpretation, governs many human-subjects concerns in research funded by government agencies; it is influential as well in non-governmental organizations.

As Klovdahl states, anyone proposing to study social networks needs to address two basic issues. The first is whether the proposed work is ethically appropriate and, accordingly, whether to proceed. The second issue, where the IRBs enter most directly, concerns the confidentiality protection appropriate to a proposed project. In the section of his paper devoted to protecting confidentiality, Klovdahl reviews nine steps that researchers can take, ranging from the segmentation of instruments for data collection to destruction of identifying data at the earliest possible moment. He goes on to examine such issues as when waivers of informed consent might be appropriately requested, and he develops a critique of the idea that unitary policies should be applied to the protection of secondary subjects (i.e., persons named as contacts by the primary network members in the study, or "third parties"). Klovdahl thus moves far beyond the truism that research in the area of infectious disease control should seek a balance between effectiveness and protection of human subjects, to consider many of the practical concerns that network researchers actually confront.

Charles Kadushin's masterful essay on the ethics of social network research concludes this special issue. The author draws on the experiences of other social networks researchers (gleaned from a session on ethics that he organized at a recent Sunbelt social networks conference, and from listserve discussions) and, in particular, on a wealth of experience that he has himself acquired in a wide range of academic and applied social network studies. Here is a sampling of questions that the reader will find discussed in Kadushin's article. It may seem ethical to publish a list of "leading intellectuals" based on network nominations, but are you thereby violating the privacy of all the intellectuals who were "left out" of your list? Is it ethical to use data that are "legally" available (such as salaries and qualifications of faculty members at public universities) if the individuals whose names are published

probably would not have the expectation that their salary status would be compared in print with that of their colleagues? What are the ethics of the "one-way street" by which researchers might contribute network-analysis procedures to a military some of whose interrogators might subsequently engage in abusive practices in order to collect network data for analysis? To whom within an organization should one give feedback, at what level of detail, and how can a company's unions as well as management be legitimately persuaded to endorse a network study? How can a social scientist cooperate with a journalist to study a national financial elite, and what happens when they disagree over publishing the names of the nodes in their sociograms? As the author writes, raising questions, even raising more questions than can be answered, is a requirement of discussions of ethics. Kadushin provides concrete examples and illuminations that allow the reader to gain insight in thinking these questions through.

A main question of Kadushin's paper, signified in its title, is who benefits from network analysis? I would not give away the answer in this introduction (and the author of course acknowledges that benefits are a tricky subject), but I will underscore its importance in providing frameworks within which we can gain clarity about the consequences of our academic and applied research.

The next time I offer my graduate seminar in network analysis, then, I will make this special journal issue on ethics available to my students in conjunction with discussion of the practical issues in designing and conducting a network study. I might combine these readings with Horowitz's (1967/1974) classic case study of an applied social science research project gone wrong, ethically and along other dimensions, a study that is prominently referenced in Rebecca Goolsby's article in this issue. I might ask students to reconsider the article of Shelley et al. (1995) on how the stigmatizing nature of AIDS resulted in selective knowledge regarding a person's HIV status among social network members, and how this result can be used to improve modeling of HIV prevalence in the general population in a way that is protective of human subjects. Charles Kadushin refers to this study (which appeared in a special issue of *Social Networks* edited by Alden Klovdahl) in his paper in this special issue. I will ask my students to grapple with the implications of Borgatti and Molina's insistence that organizational network research involves an agreement (however implicit or tacit) among at least three parties, management as well as respondents and researchers. Moreover, I will consider these questions and others like them in their direct bearing on my own research projects. The authors of articles in this special issue do us all a service by calling for increased awareness and community consciousness of the distinctive ethical dimensions to our social network research.

Following the four papers on ethics, this issue concludes with an essay commissioned by our book review editors. I hope that Claude Fischer's review of Putnam's controversial book *Bowling Alone* provokes further research as well as spirited discussion.

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