Challenges in research ethics education in the behavioral and social sciences appears to stem from two distinct yet related sources. One is the use of the terms “research ethics” and “research regulations” interchangeably. And, second is the notion that the ethical and regulatory frameworks for the protection of human research participants are not applicable to the behavioral and social sciences.

The unfortunate practice of using the terms research ethics and research regulations synonymously is clearly evident in most (if not all) educational and training programs that are currently available (e.g., CITI, NIH module, etc.). These programs focus mainly on the federal regulations and regulatory compliance, not on the ethical underpinnings of research with human participants. One consequence of confounding ethics and regulations is that it makes researchers more resistant to and wary of both research ethics education and regulatory compliance.

Resistance to mandatory research ethics education is aggravated by the misperception among some behavioral and social scientists that the ethical framework underlying research with human participants and the ensuing regulations were designed for biomedical research and not research in the behavioral or social sciences. This misconception also adds to the challenge of research ethics education, because requiring such training is often seen as unnecessary bureaucratic oppression by both faculty and students. They often feel that the issues are irrelevant to their type of research, that is, the ethical framework and ensuing regulations fit biomedical research and not research in the behavioral or social sciences. What little truth there is to this misperception is rooted neither in the underlying ethical principles, nor in the regulations per se, but in the implementation of the regulations at the local level. For example, sometimes institutional review boards (IRB) require language in the
consent form about alternatives to participation in a lab-based cognitive psychology study (when participants are not students who are participating in the research for course credit).

Furthermore, the commonly used dichotomy between biomedical research and “non-biomedical” research, which encompasses the behavioral, cognitive, economic, educational, psychological, and social sciences may also contribute to the challenge of research ethics education for psychological scientists. This dichotomy is particularly challenging when dealing with the discipline of psychology because the breadth of psychological science research spans the continuum with biomedical research on one end and social research on the other. Research in psychological science can range from randomized control trials that are more typical of biomedical research to interviews, surveys, and questionnaires that are typically associated with social science research. Thus, research ethics issues that are germane to subfields of behavioral and psychological science that are more like social science (e.g., social psychology, cognitive psychology, industrial/organizational psychology, etc.) can be very different from those in behavioral and psychological research that is more akin to biomedical and clinical research (e.g., behavioral neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, psychopharmacology, psychoneuroimmunology, etc.). Thus, unlike current practice, educational programs need to be tailored to the specific disciplines and sub-disciplines and cannot be a one-size-fit-all model for all non-biomedical sciences.

In addition, this inaccurate dichotomy, reinforces the misperception that the ethical framework and ensuing regulations fit a “biomedical” model, and is being foisted upon the “non-biomedical” disciplines. A better appreciation of the ethical principles underlying research can go a long way in helping researchers recognize the role of and make sense of the regulations. It would also lead to more prudent interpretation and application of the regulations, which in turn would make for better IRB-researcher relationships.

Finally, the federal requirements for research ethics education is relatively new, so within the more academically-based disciplines it is often misconstrued as a violation of academic freedom. As defined in the Encyclopedia Britannica, academic freedom refers to “the freedom of teachers and students to teach, study, and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from law, institutional regulations, or public pressure” (emphasis added). Complaints about regulatory requirements for the protection of human research
participants being in violation academic freedom are often based on the view that such requirements are unreasonable as they are irrelevant to research outside the biomedical realm. The absence of an appreciation for the breadth of ethical principles underlying research, the flexibility of the regulations, and the relevance of both to virtually all research with human participants, thus appear to underlie such protests.

In addition, by putting the research enterprise in context—recognizing society’s decision to foster and promote science (both basic and applied research) and to invest in its infrastructure emphasizes the fact that the ability to conduct research is not a right but a privilege and responsibility granted by various entities including the researcher’s own institution, the funding agency, and the public at large (Oakes, 2002; Eissenberg, 2004). And with that responsibility come obligations and accountability to the public, especially when research is publicly funded. Recognizing the ability to conduct research which involves other individuals (the subjects/participants) as a responsibility and not a right will vitiate arguments about regulatory oversight of research violating academic freedom.

In conclusion, effective research ethics education calls for the development of more focused and discipline-specific programs. Institutions need to move away from stand-alone research ethics courses and modules, which tend to be disassociated and isolated from the core educational program in the different disciplines. Instead research ethics needs to be integral part of undergraduate and graduate training, similar to such courses as research methods and statistics. In addition, schools and departments need to assess how research ethics can be incorporated throughout their curricula. While not an easy task, the result will be future generations of scientists who have an inherent understanding and respect for research ethics and its interplay with research regulations.

NOTES

1 The opinions presented in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent the views or official position of the American Psychological Association (APA).
REFERENCES
