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Oral History Projects and Research Involving Human Subjects

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Description

A graduate student has a disagreement with his advisor as to whether oral histories should be subject to ethical review via his university's institutional review board.

Body

After completing two years of archival research on educational programs designed for American Indians in Chicago from 1952 to 2002, Nelson Putnam, a Ph.D. candidate in history, began planning an oral history project to add depth and breadth to the information he collected. He believed that without such a project, the full history of the programs would never be known and understood. He also believed that American Indians who were administrators, teachers, volunteers, and students of such programs should have an opportunity to describe and analyze the history of the programs and that the exclusion of such information was unethical and problematic. A previous work focusing on Chicago’s American Indian community made use of only a few oral histories and many in the community felt the work did not reflect their views of the past. In addition, he wanted to preserve the oral histories for future researchers and developed a deed of gift agreement with a private Indian-controlled college in Chicago to store the recordings in its archives. The deed of gift agreement specified that the interview tape and transcript would be available to the public upon request.

Putnam met with his dissertation advisor regarding the oral history project and his application to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for an expedited review. After explaining the importance of the project, Putnam asked his advisor for feedback on the application and the project. The advisor respected and valued the use of oral history in research, felt that Putman's methodology and goals were clear, and hoped he would soon begin the project; however, he was concerned about submitting the application to the IRB and refused to sponsor it.

Putnam's advisor explained that oral histories remained outside of IRB jurisdiction and cited a policy statement from the Oral History Association and American Historical Association: "Most oral history interviewing projects are not subject to the requirements of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) regulations for the protection of human subjects at 45 CFR part 46, subpart A, and can be excluded from institutional review board (IRB) oversight because they do not involve research as defined by the HHS regulations." The advisor explained how he, the department chairperson, and the members of the department felt that IRBs were never developed to apply to historians. Since the university's IRB never required historians to apply for approval, he believed that it could become a "slippery slope" whereby the IRB would officially adopt a position requiring oral historians to apply for review. Furthermore, he said he felt many IRBs impinged upon the academic freedom of historians by requiring review. He fully supported the project as long as it met the guidelines detailed by the Oral History Association and did not involve the university's IRB.

Putnam recognized that most oral history projects involved minimal risks to participants; however, he felt the inherent risks, while minimal, established a need for IRB approval and oversight. Participating in oral histories could evoke painful memories and document statements that could negatively affect a participant's reputation among family, friends, and Chicago's American Indian community. He also knew that most oral histories could eventually become sources of published "generalizable knowledge" and should, therefore, be subject to the same IRB policies governing research involving human subjects.

Putnam disagreed with his advisor's position on IRBs and oral history projects. His mentor in the anthropology department strongly supported Putnam's belief that an application to the IRB was necessary, even if not required, and offered to sponsor Putman's application. As a Ph.D. candidate two years into his dissertation research, he found himself in a great predicament: submit his application to the IRB sponsored

by his mentor and jeopardize his relationship with his advisor or disregard his ethical beliefs to remain in good standing with his advisor possibly damaging his relationship with his mentor and his specific academic community.

Questions

1. How might Putnam reconcile the position of his advisor with his belief in IRB approval for oral history projects?
2. How can the differing opinions between Putnam's faculty advisor and faculty mentor be resolved without severing relationships?
3. If professional organizations in the social sciences have set strict guidelines for ethical research, how can an IRB benefit and/or harm the research process?
4. How might publishing without IRB approval harm Putnam's academic career?

Contributor(s)

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Resource Type

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