



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Ethical Issues in Student Research

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Description

James, a graduate student in psychology, is teaching an undergraduate experimental psychology class, wants his students to conduct their own research projects as part of the coursework. Usually, research that is not going to be published and is solely for educational purposes does not need approval from the institutional review board. However, one group wants to study sex differences in depression by having classmates fill out questionnaires. Does this research topic fall into the same category? This case looks at issues of research involving student participants.

Body

Part 1

James Bowers is an advanced graduate student in psychology. As part of his graduate training he is teaching an undergraduate class in experimental psychology under the supervision of Dr. Holden. James believes that the best way for his students to learn the principles of experimental psychology is to have the students conduct their own research projects, a practice which has been common in other experimental psychology classes. He plans to have the students design and conduct the research projects using other class members as research participants. The projects will be used for educational purposes only, meaning that the projects will

not be published or presented outside of class. According to the regulations of his university's IRB, research conducted for educational purposes that does not contribute to generalizable knowledge is typically exempt from review.

Questions

1. Should the purposes of research studies (i.e. whether they are conducted for educational purposes or meant to be published in a journal) have an impact on whether or not they are submitted for review? Why or why not?
2. What other factors should impact whether research studies are submitted for review?

Part 2

James consults with senior graduate students in his program who have previously taught the experimental psychology course. They tell James that research conducted for educational purposes does not require review by the IRB, and that they did not submit their students' projects when they taught the class. Taking their advice, James decides not to submit the research projects to the IRB. James allows his students to generate their own ideas for their research projects. Most groups decide to conduct research on topics in cognitive psychology that pose little or no harm to participants. One group, however, decides to study sex differences in depression by having classmates fill out questionnaires.

Questions

3. Would asking questions about depressive symptoms put research participants at risk? How so?
4. If James approves this research project, should he submit it to the IRB?
5. What other ethical issues may arise from conducting this research?
6. Should James allow the students to study depression?

Part 3

Given his own interest in clinical psychology, James decides that his students should be given the opportunity to conduct research on topics in clinical psychology and permits them to conduct the study on depression. Furthermore, he believes that asking students about their symptoms of depression will not put them at risk since they will merely be reporting on how they already feel.

James ensures that the data is collected anonymously and that the students' are aware that there will be no penalty for not participating in the research. All the students participate. While James is helping his students code and analyze the data, he notices that two students have reported a large number of depressive symptoms, including hopelessness, thoughts of suicide, sleeplessness, problems concentrating, and irritability.

Questions

7. Is it ethical to ask about psychopathology without intending to treat it? If so, under what circumstances?
8. What should James do about the two students who anonymously reported depressive symptoms?

Part 4

James decides against trying to identify the two students. Instead, he mentions to the entire class that he is concerned that several students may be suffering from depression. In an attempt to encourage the two students to seek help, he also mentions that whoever reported more than four symptoms of depression should contact the university behavioral health center.

Questions

9. Was it appropriate for James to mention his concerns to the class?
10. If so, should he have done it differently? How so?
11. Do the dual roles of teacher and researcher present conflicting responsibilities for James? If so, what are the conflicting responsibilities and how should they be resolved?

Contributor(s)

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Case Study / Scenario

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Topics

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Social and Behavioral Sciences

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