



Online Ethics Center
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To Tell or Not to Tell

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Description

While doing observations at a local factory, a sociologist overhears some employees talking about tampering with a union vote. This same group of employees had opted to not be part of his study. The researcher wants to alert the union leaders about the potential tampering but he promised not to use any of his interactions with these employees. What should he do?

Body

Kenneth is a sociologist interested in studying gender in blue-collar workplaces. He gains permission from a local factory to conduct observations in a common area where workers often congregate before and after shifts and during breaks, talking and joking with one another. This is where the company posts announcements, and where drivers may purchase sodas or coffee. Kenneth hopes to get to know many of the drivers during his observation, and will use the information he gathers to shape questions to use in individual interviews he plans to conduct later in his research. As a condition of his Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the project, he is required to post an informational letter in the common area explaining his research. The letter also states that individual employees have the right to “opt-out” of the research at any time — to request that they not be included in Kenneth’s field notes.

Kenneth begins his observations successfully and starts developing a rapport with many of the employees. Three workers let him know that they’d rather not be

included as part of his research. He notes their names and descriptions, to ensure that he will remember them for subsequent visits.

During the course of his observations, some of the employees are taking part in a union organizing drive at the company. Things are tense, with both sides papering the walls with information designed to influence drivers' opinions. Many of the employees are fiercely pro-union, while many others are very much against the idea. For those who are against the idea, foremost in their mind is the fact that the company's primary client is known to be eager to avoid dealing with unionized suppliers. It is also widely known that Marie, the factory's owner, previously headed up a company that had voted to go union, which she subsequently shut down. So there is a feeling among some employees that going union will mean that they will be out of jobs. Those employees who argue for a union are motivated by a general atmosphere of disrespect at the company, exacerbated by recent changes in the pay scale and benefits package. So while the unionization drive is not the focal point of Kenneth's research, it becomes an important framing event for his observations.

One afternoon while observing, Kenneth sees a couple of the workers who had "opted out" of his study approaching the common area. Before they see him, Kenneth ducks into the restroom, wishing to avoid making himself and the employees uncomfortable. The walls are thin however, so he can't help but overhear their conversation. One worker expresses his fear that the company will vote the union in. The other worker says quietly, "Don't worry — I've been working with Marie and a couple of others to get that situation under control. You'll never see a union voted in here."

Feeling awkward about what is being said, Kenneth remains in the restroom until they have left. Overhearing this conversation poses a number of troubling questions for him. After hearing this exchange, he may have reason to believe that people are tampering with the union vote, scheduled for the next day, but he cannot be sure exactly what the men were referring to. He wants to alert union officials to the possibility of tampering, but has promised not to use any of his interactions with these drivers in his research. He is fearful that calling any attention to the situation will result in his no longer being welcome to conduct research at this company, wasting the time he and the participants have spent together and the interesting data he has already collected. What should he do?

Questions

1. Should Kenneth have stayed out in the common area when he saw the workers approaching? Was he “eavesdropping”? Do the workers have an expectation of privacy in a common area of the factory?
2. How does the fact that the workers in question have opted out of his research affect his obligations to them? Does Kenneth’s responsibility not to include these workers in his field notes extend to a responsibility to protect them in other ways, such as in the current situation?
3. Does his status as a researcher give him different responsibilities in this case than if he were there as a fellow worker, or someone with no formal involvement in the company? If he had overheard the conversation off of company property, would this change his obligations?
4. Does the fact that the conversation had little to do with the specific focus of his research change his obligations of confidentiality?
5. How can he be sure about the meaning of what he overheard? If he does decide to tell someone about what he overheard, who should he tell, and why? Would telling someone put Kenneth’s safety at risk if his name got out?
6. If he does come forward, and his disclosure prompts action on the part of the union and/or the company, what are the ethical implications of a researcher affecting change in the research site?
7. Would Kenneth’s obligations change if he had overheard employees attempting to ensure unionization, rather than attempting to defeat it?

Contributor(s)

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