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Ethical Issues in Psychological Research with Sexual Minorities

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Description

A psychologist is studying how some individuals suffer negative mental health consequences in the face of gay-related stress (often caused by discrimination). How can the psychologist ethically recruit young participants for this study to ensure diversity in the participant group and avoid the negative consequences of making participants hyper-aware of gay-related stressors?

Body

Researchers have established that gay men experience psychological problems such as anxiety and depression to a greater degree than their heterosexual counterparts. Additionally, it has been shown that this increased risk for psychological problems exists in part because of the stress experiences gay individuals face on account of their minority status in a majority-heterosexual society. Yet all gay men do not experience similar levels of stress on account of being gay, nor do they react in similar ways to stressful events. Why do some gay men experience more stress than others? Why do some of these individuals suffer negative mental health consequences in the face of gay-related stress while others do not?

In order to investigate these questions, Dr. Brian Halpern, a gay psychologist, plans to conduct two studies, both intended to examine factors that might impact stress

exposure and mental health in gay men. Study 1 utilizes a short-term longitudinal design in which gay men will report on their experiences with gay-related stress and mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression, self-esteem, satisfaction with life) at the end of the day for 14 consecutive days. Study 2 will examine the stress processes of gay men through the use of semi-structured interviews.

Part 1

For Study 1, participants will be provided with definitions and examples of particular gay-related stressors such as discrimination and perceptions of stigma. Furthermore, participants will be trained to recognize such gay-related stressors in their daily lives so that they can report on them in their daily diaries. Brian is aware that such training could lead participants to become more aware of the discrimination that is aimed at them because of their minority status. Additionally, given evidence that stress and psychological problems are related, Brian knows that hyper-vigilance to stress could lead participants to be more depressed/anxious than they would be if they were not participating in the study.

Questions

1. Given what Brian knows about stress and mental health, is it ethical for him to have participants focus on the stress they experience? Why or why not?
2. What could Brian do to manage the risk faced by participants? How can he insure that he is maximizing benefits while minimizing risks?
3. Is it ethical to ignore a research question in order to protect potential participants? Under what circumstances might the benefits of research outweigh the potential costs faced by participants? Who should be responsible for making such decisions?

Part 2

Brian is interested in investigating how age and length of time since revealing a gay identity affect the daily experience of stress and the resultant mental health outcomes for gay men. Brian hypothesizes that young gay men may be at particular risk for gay-related stress, a finding that would help explain the increased risk of

suicide faced by gay youth. In order to test his hypothesis, Brian needs to recruit a diverse sample of gay men, including younger men and older men. The university institutional review board is requiring that Brian get parental approval for any participants younger than 18 years of age. This poses a problem for Brian as many of the young people he intends to recruit are not out to their parents. Additionally, for many of these young men, revealing a gay identity could jeopardize their relationships with family and peers.

Questions

4. What are Brian's responsibilities to potential participants who are minors? What about his responsibilities to these young men's parents? To the university IRB? To science?
5. What options are available to Brian?
 - a. How could he alter his study design?
 - b. In some circumstances, IRBs will waive parental consent if parental involvement is harmful (e.g. abused or neglected children). How could Brian present a case to the IRB as to why they should waive parental permission?

Part 3

In order to recruit gay men into Study 2, Brian seeks out help from the local Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community center. Because the center does a lot of HIV outreach and HIV research, it has its own internal institutional review board from which Brian is required to get approval for his study. Upon gaining approval, Brian begins recruiting participants and collecting data. At this point, Brian receives a phone call from the research director at the LGB community center, Sara. Sara informs Brian that when he is done with the research, she wants to see the results. Citing fears that the gay community might be presented in a negative light, she tells Brian that before anything can be published with these data she has to approve the manuscript.

Questions

6. Because of his partnership with the center and because of their willingness to provide access to participants, does Brian have to involve them in the writing process?
7. As a gay man himself, does Brian have a responsibility to present the gay community in a positive manner?
8. Through his interviews, it becomes clear to Brian that being out of the closet is associated with experiencing more gay-related stress, a finding that may suggest that staying in the closet is a healthy option. Brian feels uncomfortable making this statement or having anyone assume it is the case. Is it ethical for him to hide his findings and let the data rest in a file drawer? Why? Why not?

Part 4

Several months after completing all of the interviews for Study 2, Brian receives a phone call from a distraught young man named David. Through heavy sobs, David explains that his partner and he were participants in Brian's interview study and that his partner has recently passed away after being hit by a speeding car. David goes on to say that he is calling with the hopes that he can have the audiotape of his partner's interview. He ends by saying that this would be the only living record he would have of the man he loved and with whom he shared part of his life.

Questions

9. Should Brian release the audiotape? Why? Why not?
10. Is Brian betraying a participant's trust by releasing the tape without approval? What responsibility does Brian have for maintaining the confidentiality of his participants?
11. What circumstances are there, if any, in which agreements of confidentiality should be broken?

Contributor(s)

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