

# Author's Commentary on "To Control or Not to Control?"

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This case raises concerns about a researcher's ethical obligations to her research and research participants, and how those obligations can conflict with her responsibilities and obligations toward her employer and clients.

Sherry's primary responsibility is working with students who are experiencing academic difficulty, particularly those on academic probation. These students on probation are facing academic dismissal from college if they do not improve their grades in the current or following term. As she works with these students, she decides that they would probably benefit by taking a course on effective study skills. Because of the large number of students experiencing academic troubles, Sherry feels this strategy will be the most efficient use of her time, providing the students with increased contact with her -- ten hours per term as opposed to 45-60 minutes per term.

Sherry is also in graduate school with only her research thesis left to complete her Master of Science degree. She sees this course on study skills for academically troubled students as an interesting research thesis.

At this point, the tension between Sherry's role as a professional and her role as a researcher becomes apparent. Sherry must consider her responsibilities and

obligations to her employer and her moral responsibility for the effect of her work with the students. Yet Sherry as researcher must consider the ethical obligation she has to conduct the best research she possibly can.

## **Sherry's Obligation as Academic Counselor**

Sherry may argue that she has a moral obligation to fulfill the responsibility given her by her employer to help students experiencing academic difficulty improve their grades. That means that she will help students to learn skills that could enable them to improve their academic standing. As she has explored the research literature conducted in traditional college settings that focused on low academically achieving students, she finds that positive results have been observed when those students learn appropriate study skills.

Even though students at this technical college are drawn from a different population than those who attend traditional colleges, Sherry believes that her students would probably benefit as much, if not more, from learning successful study skills. Perhaps because of her review of the research literature, she finds study skills to be the most successful factor in helping students improve their academic standing.

Given Sherry's feeling of responsibility (to her employer and to the students) to help the students improve their grades, it is understandable that she would feel an ethical obligation to provide these students the opportunity to learn successful study skills, increasing their chances of getting off academic probation and eventually earning their college degrees.

## **Sherry's Obligation as Researcher**

Sherry could argue that it is "the initial ethical obligation of psychologists to conduct the best research of which they are capable." American Psychological Association/Committee for the Protection of Human Participants in Research, Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants (Washington, D.C.: APA, 1984), p. 18. It is her thesis committee's opinion that the best design for her research will include a control group of students who do not receive the study skills

course or any other treatment intervention for the duration of the study.

Sherry could agree with her thesis committee's position, allowing for a control group whose members receive no intervention. She has an ethical responsibility to conduct her research in the most rigorous and scientific manner possible. Certainly for the research Sherry is proposing, a control group would be the most sound experimental design, and the knowledge that could be gained from this research might be used to benefit an even greater number of students in academic trouble.

However, Sherry decided before consulting her thesis committee that her research design would not include a control group. She made this decision based on the results she found in her literature search, which indicated that the study skills intervention produced improvement in most students' GPAs in traditional college settings. Her concern about the possible negative effect for students who would not receive the study skills intervention led her to believe that priority must be given to the research participants' welfare rather than the best research design.

## **Contribution research made to knowledge vs. cost to the research participant**

Three principles have been proposed for ethical research involving human participants. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979); Robin Levin Penslar, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Materials* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

*Respect for persons.* Respect for persons incorporates at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection. National Commission, *Belmont Report*, p. 4. Respect for persons means that the participants in a study are not to be treated solely as means to an end. If Sherry decides to use a control group, it could appear that she is using the members who receive no intervention only as a means to produce the most rigorous research possible without

regard to any negative impact it might have on those participants. The majority of these students are the first persons in their families to attend college. Most had barely passed the college's entrance exam, indicating that their previous education may have inadequately prepared them for this opportunity for a higher education. It is possible that these students' dignity and self-esteem is intimately tied to their success in college. They have indicated their interest in taking the study skills course, evidence that they want to do what they can to improve their grades. Sherry has an obligation to respect their motivations and include them in the course.

*Beneficence.* Researchers treat persons in an ethical manner not only by protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being. Beneficence here is understood in a strong sense, as an obligation. Two general rules have been formulated as complementary expressions of beneficent actions in this sense: 1) do no harm and 2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms. Ibid.

The principle of beneficence assumes that investigators will carefully think through the implications of their research. This principle means that the research should provide participants with maximum benefits while risks are minimized. Clearly the students who receive the study skills training have a greater possibility of receiving maximum benefits and minimal risks, if any (based on the research literature).

The benefits and risks for students in a proposed control group need to be examined carefully. The risks to the students in the control group may appear to be minimal. If the research shows no benefit to the experimental group, the students in the control group would not have invested their time in a useless course. If the results of the study are positive, they can participate in the study skills course after the end of the study. However, as stated in the case, these students are on academic probation and are in danger of being dismissed at the end of the current academic term if their GPAs do not improve. It is important to understand what success in college might mean to these students. As the first persons in their families to attend college, their families have high expectations for them. Failing at this technical college could have a profound impact on their dignity and self-esteem.

The best possible scenario is that they will have one more term to improve their grades to avoid being dismissed from school. Some of the students in the control group would not have the opportunity to participate during the next term because they would already have been dismissed from school due to academic ineligibility. Those students who had two terms to raise their GPA might had a better chance to

do so if they had received the study skills training prior to the term in which they might be dismissed.

*Justice.* The principle of justice centers on "who ought to receive the benefits of research and bear its burdens."Ibid., p. 5. The Belmont Report conceptualizes the principle of justice as obligating the researcher to determine "fairness" toward the research participants and the interests of society.

Thus, Sherry must consider that "the general ethical question always is whether a negative effect upon the dignity and welfare of the participants is warranted by the importance of the research. . . [and that]. . . in weighing the pros and cons of conducting research that raises ethical questions, priority must be given to the research participant's welfare and dignity."APA, Ethical Principles, p. 18. The benefits to society of evidence that a study skills course does or does not positively impact the success of technical college students in their academic standing will not outweigh the negative effect on students who did not receive the intervention.

## **Are there alternative research designs?**

Sherry could explore other research designs and methodologies that will allow her to conduct sound research and still fulfill her ethical obligations to her students. One possibility would be to use students who do not volunteer to participate in the study skills course as control group participants. The difficulty with this design is that the very act of not volunteering could be an indication that those students so different from the students who volunteer that one could not compare the results. Another design methodology might be for Sherry to take half the students who volunteer for the study skills course and meet with them for the same amount of time as students who take the course, but not work with them on study skills. This design could provide valuable insight as to whether it is the study skills that students are learning that enable them to achieve better grades, or whether it is simply contact and attention from someone who is concerned with their academic progress.

## **Who has the final ethical responsibility?**

According to the APA,

Whether a proposed research project is ethically acceptable. . . is a matter on which the individual investigator is obliged to come to a considered judgment without abdicating this responsibility on the grounds of current practice, regulatory considerations, or judgments by others. . . . The investigator. . . must accept the final ethical responsibility for deciding whether or how to proceed. . . . The teacher or research supervisor should respect the moral judgment of students and assistants. If students or assistants feel a moral reluctance to carry out a research procedure, the supervisor should not pressure them to perform the procedure, even though it seems completely acceptable. Ibid., pp. 19, 21, 30.

Sherry has the sole ethical responsibility for deciding whether and how to proceed. She cannot abdicate her responsibility to her thesis committee. Even though they might disagree with Sherry's decision, her committee members must not pressure her to go against what she feels are her moral obligations to her students and her employer.