

Author's Commentary on "Ethical Issues in Student Research"

Commentary On
Ethical Issues in Student Research

This case examines ethical issues involved in conducting student research, a practice common in undergraduate experimental psychology classes. Specifically, it considers the circumstances under which student research is exempt from review by an institutional review board (IRB) and suggests the importance of incorporating research ethics training into experimental psychology class curricula. This case also examines broader issues in conducting research, and is an example of how poor planning at early stages of research development can lead to complex and potentially risky circumstances. James, the main character in this case, faces increasingly difficult ethical choices that might have been avoided if he had taken greater care in assessing the risks of his students' research project and submitted their proposal to the IRB for review.

The case begins with James deciding whether he must submit his students' research proposals for review by his university's IRB. James considers whether his students' research, which will be conducted for in-class, an educational purpose only, is exempt from review. Although the National Research Act, Public Law 93-348, states that the generalizability of the knowledge gained from a research study should be considered when making decisions regarding exemption from review, it also states that the potential for harm must be considered. Studies that do not contribute to generalizable knowledge are only exempt from review if they pose no harm to their participants. James is making his decision about whether his students' projects will require review before he knows enough about them to make such a decision. James must know the nature of the studies before he can make an informed decision whether or not they should be submitted for review.

James consults with more experienced graduate students when deciding whether or not to submit his students' research projects. Although the input of one's peers can be invaluable in making ethical decisions, they can also be a source of bias since

one's peers share a common perspective. James and his fellow graduate students may share the perspective that submitting in-class projects for review is far too time consuming to be practical. Including other perspectives into the discussion, including those of potential participants, would assist in predicting risks to participants that may otherwise be difficult to imagine. Submitting research proposals to an IRB is an efficient and effective way to gain diverse perspectives, because the typical IRB includes representatives from outside the scientific community as well as research scientists from a variety of disciplines.

James' students generate a variety of research project ideas, and most pose no harm to research participants. However, one project involves the assessment of depressive symptoms, and it is less clear what risks may be involved. It is at this point, when James knows the exact nature of the proposed research studies, that he is able to consider whether or not he should submit the proposals for review by his university's IRB. The studies that clearly pose no harm to research participants would be exempt from review, according to the regulations of his IRB. However, the project involving the assessment of depressive symptoms should be submitted because James is probably unprepared to assess the potential harm of the study. The IRB would most likely be better prepared to assess accurately the risk involved. It is possible that having participants reflect on their depressive symptoms could increase their severity, and because the research is being conducted by students and on students from the same class, the possibility arises that students could learn about each other's depressive symptoms. Thus, potential risks include the negative effects of asking about psychopathology and the loss of privacy and subsequent damage to the depressed students' reputations.

Even if asking about depressive symptoms does not harm research participants directly, having this information could increase James' degree of responsibility for the well-being of his participants and students. James never considers what his responsibility toward his students would be if he learned that several of them were depressed. His role as teacher requires him to consider the well-being of each individual student, and although his role as researcher requires him to consider the safety of his research participants, it also requires him to maintain confidentiality. James faces this ethical dilemma when he learns that several of his students are endorsing symptoms of hopelessness, thoughts of suicide, sleeplessness, problems concentrating, and irritability. Because James failed to prepare for this situation, he is left with imperfect response options. He is unable to identify the depressed

students directly, and he feels that saying nothing to the students would be irresponsible. James decides that his best option is to announce to the class that several students may have depression, and he recommends that these students visit the student counseling center.

Because James did not consider the ethical implications of his students' research projects, and because he did not submit the depression study for review, he faces a series of increasingly difficult ethical dilemmas. James should have submitted the one questionable study for review because he was incapable of assessing the risks and responsibilities involved. In addition, James should have involved his students in discussions about research ethics and the IRB since these are central aspects of conducting research in psychology. This may have helped James to avoid the ethical dilemmas that were to come. However, once he knew about his students depressive symptoms, he was compelled both as a teacher and researcher to take action. Furthermore, once James knew about his students' depressive symptoms, the harm involved in potentially breaking confidentiality was probably less than the harm involved in allowing potentially-depressed students to go without help. Although many research studies assess psychopathology without including treatment, they are typically designed in such a way that research participants are informed of their diagnoses and provided with treatment referrals. James should never have allowed the study to have been conducted as it was, and submitting the study in question to his IRB probably would have prevented him from doing so.

References

National Research Act, Pub. L. No. 93-348. (1974).