

Ullica Segerstrale's Commentary on "To Tell or Not to Tell"

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The author of the prior commentary sees this as a case of conflicting obligations of a researcher, falling within the realm of research ethics. The main questions concern the confidentiality that Kenneth promised to everyone, the special status of the three workers who didn't want to be involved, and Kenneth's dilemma when it came to reporting or not reporting the overheard conversation.

I see this case as only partly a matter of research ethics and partly a broader matter of politics, or of general ethics. Here are a number of observations:

1. There is the whole problem of what actually Kenneth overheard. Kenneth believes that the particular dialogue snippet indicates that someone is going to tamper with the votes. But the snippet "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" may mean a number of things. The statement may have nothing whatsoever to do with tampering with the voting results. It may for instance refer to a planned last minute persuasion campaign which the worker believes will have the effect of deterring unionization. Or it may refer to some last minute threats or incentives that he knows that Marie has planned in order to deter worker unionization, and which he believes will work. Or something else.
2. Another question is whether Kenneth's agreement with the three workers really required him to go as far as to duck away into the restroom in order not to be seen! But perhaps there was something else going on that made Kenneth believe that he would better not be seen, but which we have not been told — for instance, perhaps Kenneth already heard something of what they said as they approached, or perhaps they looked very conspiratorial, etc. The fact that these workers did not wish to be part of a study is not suspicious by itself. However, Kenneth may have had his own particular suspicions about them. We

need to know more about the reasons for Kenneth's decision to avoid meeting the workers.

3. The controversy over unionization is useful as a framing event, as controversies usually are, making people more willing to express their feelings and beliefs about the company and other matters. Perhaps we should know more about what kinds of things Kenneth hopes to investigate through his observations? The connection to gender research, the theme of the study, is missing in the Kenneth example. (Also, is this study only involving observations and not interviews? The word "interview" is not mentioned).
4. An interesting question that this study raises is, "Whose side is Kenneth on?" and also, "Whose side should he be on?" In controversies, this is an important matter for a researcher to resolve. From the story it seems that Kenneth is identifying himself with the workers who want to unionize rather than with the workers who are against unionization. What is the rationale for this?

As a fact-finding researcher Kenneth might want to keep an independent stance in order to find out about the reasoning on both sides in a controversy. (This is the approach I explicitly took myself in *Defenders of the Truth*, Segerstrale, 2000, an analysis of the participants in the sociobiology controversy). As some type of action researcher, again, one assumes Kenneth would want to take the side of the "underdog." But who is the underdog here, and from whose point of view? Should Kenneth perhaps be taking the side which he believes that, if victorious, will cause less overall harm to the factory's workers and their families? The families may be the real underdogs! (To make this judgment, we — and Kenneth — would need information on the possibility that the workers will find new jobs if the factory closes down, the prevailing rules for unemployment compensation, and other relevant considerations).

Of course, Kenneth may also be worried that his own research will be undermined if the workers unionize and Marie responds by closing down the factory. In any case, Kenneth needs to analyze more closely the potential consequences of his actions in a broader context.

References

- Segerstrale, Ullica, 2000. *Defenders of the Truth. The Battle for Science in the Sociobiology Debate and Beyond*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.