Author's Commentary on "Ethical Issues in Psychological Research with Sexual Minorities"

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Ethical Issues in Psychological Research with Sexual Minorities

Although this case raises a variety of ethical issues, all with their own subtleties and complexities, two particular issues will be discussed in this commentary.

Assessing Risk/Benefit Ratio

The first issue, which is raised in Part 1 of the case, concerns risk/benefit ratios when working with human participants. One of the central tenets of the Belmont Report (1979) is that researchers must (1) do no harm and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms. This case demonstrates several of the complexities inherent in the principle of beneficence.

First, how should risk be defined and determined? In Brian’s case, it is *possible* but not definite that focusing on stress experiences will have negative effects for the participants. How should Brian determine the probability of risk? If there is no realistic way to do this, how should Brian proceed?

Many scientists conducting research similar to this have relied on the fact that, in most cases, the negative impact of stress exposure is short lived. In other words, while people may experience negative effects in the moment, they quickly return to baseline and are fine in the long-term. Should calculations of risk differentially weight short-term versus long-term consequences?

Additionally, researchers conducting this type of work have stood behind their informed consent procedures. These researchers reason that as long as they are up-front from the very beginning about potential repercussions of study participation then they are within the guidelines of ethical practice. Responsibility for participant safety is ascribed to the consenting participant as opposed to the researcher. This practice may be fine in cases where the consent document is completely clear, where the potential participant is fully engaged in understanding the document and fully capable of consenting, and where the researcher is capable of answering questions about procedures and potential threats. Unfortunately, these circumstances are rare, especially in psychological research where the majority of participants are undergraduates fulfilling a course requirement. Who is ultimately responsible for determining the risk of participation? Who is ultimately responsible for the safety of research participants? The researcher? The consenting participant? The IRB?

Second, who should be considered when calculating risk/benefit ratios? Only the research participants? Society-at-large? Future generations? Brian is aware that he is possibly putting participants at risk by asking them to focus on the stress they experience in their daily lives. However, he is also aware that basic information about gay-related stress must be collected in order to create effective interventions and to help myriad gay men and lesbians cope with their minority status. If Brian were to consider only his research participants in his calculations, he would likely conclude that the benefits do not outweigh the potential harms. However, if Brian were to consider his research participants, the gay community and future generations of gay individuals, he would likely arrive at a very different conclusion. Is there an appropriate way to calculate risk/benefit ratios? Is it ever ethical to sacrifice a few individuals for a larger goal?

Bias in Social Science Research

The second issue, raised in Part 3, concerns personal or political bias in research. Many social scientists emphasize the importance of objectivity in the pursuit of knowledge. These individuals assert that science must be free of bias, and that the researcher must be neutral in relation to the topic and communities being investigated. Elias (1987) summarized this position nicely, stating that those who study human groups must learn to “keep their two roles as participant and enquirer clearly and consistently apart and . . . to establish in their work the undisputed dominance of the latter” (cited in Perry, Thurston & Green, 2004; p. 135). Others, however, argue that objectivity is impossible to attain and that better science is derived from active involvement on the researcher’s part. In their discussion of qualitative research, Perry and colleagues (2004) argued that a critical piece of the research process involves interpretation and that the researcher necessarily plays a central role in this analysis. These researchers concluded that instead of ignoring “emotional involvement” in research, we should recognize “the inevitability of involvement and the potentially significant part it can play in developing a more reality-congruent picture of complex aspects of the social world. . . .” (p. 139). Is there such thing as objective social science? If not, should scientists be responsible for revealing their biases? Is science valid if there is bias linked with data?

In his research on gay-related topics, Brian wears two hats: one as a scientist and one as a gay man. While these two identities do not have to conflict, they nevertheless can conflict. In the case, for example, Brian discovers that those who are “out” experience more gay-related stress than those who are not “out.” “Scientist Brian” finds this discovery interesting, while “Gay Brian” finds it problematic. Brian fears that revealing such a finding could encourage people to lead closeted lives and could subsequently set the gay rights movement back several decades. In deciding whether to publicize this finding or not, which one of Brian’s hats should have more weight? Is it possible to wear both hats at the same time? How?

In discussing this piece of the case it is important to realize that there are both pros and cons to Brian’s involvement in the research. On the pro side, Brian’s status as a gay man gives him credibility with the people he is studying. The gay men that Brian is reaching out to are more likely to trust him and to involve themselves in the research given that he is “one of them.” This becomes crucial when studying a group such as gay men, a group that has long been manipulated by researchers and ostracized by the psychological community. Many gay men are suspect of the research enterprise and want to know that they are not being used for research that will come to haunt them and their community later on. If Brian were heterosexual, many potential participants may opt out of the research, skeptical of the ultimate aims. On the con side, Brian’s insider status interferes with his ability to be objective. What are other pros and cons of Brian’s involvement in research on a community to which he belongs?

References

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