



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# The Cynthia Lee Case

## **Author(s)**

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## **Year**

2000

## **Description**

When Cynthia talks with a fellow graduate student doing observations at an elementary school, she finds out that her colleague has changed the parameters of her project and is observing students not included in her institutional review board application. What should Cynthia do?

## **Body**

### ***Speakers***

Narrator; Cynthia Lee; Dinah Schmidt.

### ***Background***

Cynthia Lee is a graduate student in the School of Education. As part of her dissertation research, she is observing one class of third graders and their teachers at Pinetop, a local public elementary school. About halfway into the semester, Cynthia notices that a student she recognizes, but has never actually met, from the School of Education who is also apparently doing observational research at Pinetop. The other student, Dinah Schmidt, is a year or two younger than Cynthia. Cynthia introduces herself to the Dinah the first chance she gets, and they agree to have

lunch the next day.

### **At lunch**

*Cynthia and Dinah talk about Pinetop, their favorite teachers and students there, the School of Education and its magnificent new building, and a variety of other topics. They hit it off very well and are both glad to have made the connection. Near the end of their lunch hour, they start discussing the research they are doing at Pinetop.*

DINAH: Professor Stern told me to watch the teachers for gender bias when they interact with the children.

CYNTHIA (*nods*): I had that as a class assignment when I was an undergraduate. What do you think of it?

DINAH: I think it's boring and it's been done. But I noticed three really interesting students. They clearly come from three different ethnic backgrounds, one isn't native to this country, another is obviously poor, and - well, on the surface they are as different as can be. But they seem to have bonded. They help each other out with schoolwork, play together, everything. Anyway, all my notes are on them. They have become my research project. After I've watched them a few more days, I'm going to interview them, a couple of their teachers, and their parents. I think it'll make a really interesting paper.

CYNTHIA (*nods*): I think I know the three you mean - they're in the fifth grade, right?

DINAH (*smiling*): You got it.

CYNTHIA (*puzzled*): They really are interesting; it's hard to miss them. But you've only been here two days. How did you get your protocol amendment approved so quickly?

DINAH (*staring blankly*): Get my what approved?

CYNTHIA (*with growing concern*): Have you told your advisor about the change in your research focus?

DINAH (*laughs*): No, she'll learn about it when I hand in the paper. It isn't anything to bother her about.

CYNTHIA: But was your original protocol approved by the IRB?

*Dinah is finding this line of questioning perplexing, and Cynthia's increasingly strained tone of voice is getting on her nerves. She glances at the clock.*

DINAH: Look, I've got to go. I don't know what you are talking about, but I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm just watching three kids instead of one teacher. I'll see you later.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- From what you know of this case, does Cynthia have any reason to be concerned?
- Is Dinah doing anything wrong?
- If you can't tell from the information provided, what is the least you would have to know to be able to make an informed judgment?

## **Notes**

Prepared for use at a workshop entitled "People Studying People: Core Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research" at the School of Education, Indiana University-Bloomington, September 2000.

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