Online Ethics Center
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Adventures in Collaborative Research

A Case Study for Performance and Discussion

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Description

A role-play case study where a graduate student in anthropology who is working on a collaborative research project. When he starts wondering if a professor also working on the project has made up some of the quotations used in their publications, the student wonders what to do. Includes a full length and abridged version of the case.

Body

PDF of full case

PDF of abridged case

Speakers: Narrator; Pat, a graduate student in journalism; Chris, a graduate student in history; Professor Utley, Director of the University Center on Race Relations (UCRR); Jamie, Chris's friend; Professor Jefferson, an anthropologist and adjunct at the UCRR.

Scene 1

NARRATOR: Professor Jefferson is an anthropologist leading an interdisciplinary team of graduate students who are studying race relations in a small rural town. The project is funded by the Federal Government and the University Center on Race Relations (UCRR). A history student has been taking notes on public documents; three students – one in journalism, one in anthropology, and one in education – have been conducting interviews; and a student in cultural geography has been studying the buildings and making maps. Their subject matter is especially interesting because it is one of the few towns of its size in the state to have had Americans of European and African descent living side-by-side for over one hundred and fifty years. The setting is the annual meeting of the American Association for the Study of Race (AASR).

Pat is walking down the crowded hallway when Chris, another student on the project, and Jamie, Chris's friend, emerge from a meeting room.

PAT: Is the session over? I guess I missed the big show.

CHRIS: [Excitedly] You sure did. Professor Jefferson was great. If the book is half as good as that paper, it will make a real splash. Look, I've got to run. [*Leaves]*

JAMIE: You and Chris are really lucky to be working with Jefferson.

PAT: I wish I could have heard it.

JAMIE: The content was dynamite, too. That Sadie Jones is a real poet.

PAT: [*Confused*] Sadie, a poet?

JAMIE: Yeah, Professor Jefferson quoted her description of the lynching several times.

PAT: That must have been dull.

JAMIE: [*Confused*] What do you mean?

PAT: I was the one who interviewed Sadie. She's no poet; all she does is spout Scripture, and all she said about the lynching was that it was God's will.

JAMIE: Nothing about redemption and brotherhood?

PAT: She talks about redemption and brotherhood all the time, but not in relation to the lynching. I've got to read that paper.

JAMIE: I should think so; you're listed as one of the authors.

Scene 2

NARRATOR: A few weeks later. The setting is the office of Professor Utley, the director of the University Center on Race Relations, where Pat has come to talk about Jefferson's paper. The UCRR is coordinating and funding a large number of projects on race relations in several states. Utley considers Jefferson a rising star and Jefferson's project and team very promising.

UTLEY: Tell me more about this lynching.

PAT: It's a really interesting incident because there are so many different versions of what happened. Chris – the historian on the project? – Chris has found documents that show pretty clearly that before the lynching, the blacks kept to their part of town and the whites to theirs. There weren't many interactions between the groups, but there were clearly some tensions. Then some white men lynched a black man named Tom Harris. And the amazing thing is that within a few months of the lynching, black people were living in the white part of town and the animosity seems to have died down for several years.

UTLEY: That's really strange. You'd expect a lynching to further divide the community, not integrate it.

PAT: We'll never know why it happened. The documents Chris has found don't shed much light on the matter, and as I say, the people old enough to remember it, or to remember stories about it, all put a different spin on it.

UTLEY: So have you talked to Professor Jefferson about your concerns?

PAT: I haven't had a chance. You know those anthropologists; always flying off to do fieldwork somewhere. Jefferson has mostly been out of town since the AASR meeting. I haven't even been able to get my hands on the paper to see what it actually says.

UTLEY: You'd better talk to Jefferson the first chance you get.

PAT: [*Upset*] This really has me concerned. I'll be listed as one of the co-authors on the book, and I don't want any book with my name on it filled with dressed-up quotations.

UTLEY: [*Soothingly*] Don't get all worked up. The book isn't going to be published any time soon; you have plenty of time to deal with it. Just relax. [*Checks the time*] I've got a meeting to get to.

Scene 3

NARRATOR: A few days later. As Utley's class lets out, Chris and Jamie pass the door. Although several of Utley's graduate students are milling about, Utley signals for Chris to enter the room. Jamie waits in the hallway.

UTLEY: Chris, I'm concerned about the project you're working on for the Center.

CHRIS: [*Worried]* What do you mean?

UTLEY: I've been talking to Pat and I'm concerned that Jefferson may be pulling some monkeyshines. You seem to be the only one who's working on the project who heard the paper. Do you think Jefferson made up those quotations from Sadie Jones?

CHRIS: [*Stunned*] Made up quotations? How should I know? I haven't done any of the interviews or read any of the transcripts. I work with archives, not with people.

UTLEY: [*Pressing the point]* But Pat heard that Jefferson's paper and the interviews don't jibe.

CHRIS: [*Defensive]* I haven't even talked to Pat about this; I don't know what you're talking about.

UTLEY: Thanks anyway.

NARRATOR: Chris leaves the room and walks away with Jamie.

JAMIE: What do you mean, "I don't know what you're talking about?" I told you about my conversation with Pat.

CHRIS: Yeah, but Utley doesn’t know that. I don’t need to get caught up in this little spat.

JAMIE: Besides, Utley really put you on the spot there.

CHRIS: Tell me about it! JAMIE: And in front of all of those students. I think some of them study with Jefferson.

CHRIS: [*Relieved to be off the hook*] The rumor mill will be grinding now.

Scene 4

NARRATOR: A few days later. Professor Jefferson is in Professor Utley’s office at the Center.

JEFFERSON: [*Amused*] What a tangled web!

UTLEY: I’m glad you’re taking it that way. If I weren’t directing this Center and responsible for the projects done under its auspices, I would have let the whole thing drop. But what I’ve heard from Pat concerned me, and I wanted to get the straight story.

JEFFERSON: Well, Pat is both right and wrong. In Pat’s interview, Sadie didn’t say much about the lynching. But I did a follow-up telephone interview and got some better material.

UTLEY: Does Pat know about that interview?

JEFFERSON: No, we haven’t had a meeting of the working group since I did it.

UTLEY: Why did you follow up with Sadie Jones? From what Pat says, she’s just a font of Scriptural quotations.

JEFFERSON: [*Smiles broadly*] Some of the people other students interviewed hinted that Sadie had a unique perspective on the lynching. It was a hunch that paid off.

UTLEY: Why were you successful when Pat wasn’t?

JEFFERSON: [*Hesitant*] Well, I was going to talk to you about this, and I’m afraid that now it will look self-serving.

UTLEY: Don’t worry; just tell me. JEFFERSON: Well, Pat really isn’t a very good interviewer.

UTLEY: That’s odd for a journalism student.

JEFFERSON: [*Shrugs]* Nevertheless, the transcripts from Pat’s interviews are all quite shallow. I was going to suggest that we not re-hire Pat next semester.

UTLEY: It’s your project; you have discretion over who works with you. By the way, do you have a transcript of your interview with Sadie Jones?

JEFFERSON: [*Looking sheepish*] As a matter of fact, I don’t. I took notes during and after the conversation, so I’m confident that the quotations are good. But you know what – my tape recorder wasn’t working. I didn’t get any of it on tape.

UTLEY: [*Chuckles sympathetically*] The nightmare of every interviewer. I assume you’ve gotten it fixed.

JEFFERSON: It was a really easy fix. All I had to do was turn off the pause button. The End

Questions for discussion

These questions are numbered for easy reference in discussion. It will not be desirable in all cases to explicitly answer every question and sub-question individually.

1. It appears that Pat is listed as an author on Jefferson’s paper even though Pat never read the paper. Is there any problem with this?

1.1. Does it matter whether Pat gave Jefferson permission to do this?

1.2. Would it make any difference if this were a publication rather than an oral presentation?

2. What do you think of Pat’s decision to talk with Professor Utley about the apparent problems with Professor Jefferson’s paper?

2.1. How much evidence is needed before a researcher raises concerns – formally or informally – about the integrity of another researcher’s work?

2.2. Does it make a difference if the researcher with suspicions is a student and the researcher suspected is a faculty member?

2.3. Would the situation have been any different if Pat had not been working on the project with Jefferson?

2.4. Does it make any difference whether Pat’s work with Jefferson is part of Pat’s dissertation research?

3. What do you think of Utley’s actions? 3.1. Was Utley’s advice to Pat sound and adequate?

3.2. What do you think of Utley’s decision to seek clarification from Chris?

3.3. What do you think of the way Utley handled it?

3.4. What do you think of Chris’s response?

3.5. Chris lied to Utley by saying, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” What do you think about Chris’s justification of the lie to Jamie?

4. Was it appropriate for Utley to bring the matter up with Jefferson?

4.1. Could it have had an impact on Jefferson’s relationship with Pat?

4.2. Should Utley have checked with Pat before talking to Jefferson?

5. Utley says, “If I weren’t directing this Center and responsible for the projects done under its auspices, I would have let the whole thing drop.” 5.1. Would this have been an appropriate course of action?

5.2. How do a person's roles or circumstances influence what he or she is ethically required to do in a situation like this?

5.3. How do a person's roles or circumstances influence what he or she is ethically allowed to do in a situation like this?

5.4. How do a person's roles or circumstances influence what he or she is ethically allowed not to do in a situation like this?

6. Is Jefferson's explanation convincing?

6.1. If Utley is not convinced, what course of action is appropriate?

6.2. At the moment, Utley only has Jefferson's word that the interview took place; no evidence has been offered. If Utley were in doubt about the story, what kind of evidence would be needed to bear Jefferson out?

6.3. If the only way to resolve the issue were to ask Sadie Jones about it, would it be appropriate for Utley to do so?

6.3.1. Would it be appropriate for Pat to do so?

7. Jefferson has approval from the Institutional Review Board for this research. Should Pat have talked to the IRB before talking to Utley?

7.1. Should Utley have talked to the IRB before talking to Jefferson?

7.2. At what point should the IRB be informed when a situation like this arises?

Notes

Prepared for use at a workshop at the University of Minnesota, February 1999.

 3 The AASR is fictional, as are all of the characters and situations in this case. The

structure of the case and the first of the questions for discussion were inspired by “The Whole Truth,” a videotape in the Integrity in Scientific Research series produced and distributed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. For more on the video series, see http://www.aaas.org/spp/video/.

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