



COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Research Integrity in Social Work Case Studies

Case One: Ethics¹

A social work practitioner in collaboration with a sociologist at a large, urban, teaching medical institution proposes a study to assess inadvertent violations of confidentiality among hospital staff. The data collection protocol is for investigators to secretly ride public elevators in the hospital and record the number of violations, the content of the violations and the discipline of the violator (from the name badge).

- *Is this proposed study ethical?*
- *Does the potential benefit of the study outweigh the obligation to obtain informed consent?*

Case Two: Human Subjects and IRB²

A doctoral student proposes a study involving a group of school-age children who have lost a parent in Iraq. The student has identified potential subjects through newspaper stories about those who have been killed and wants to contact the surviving parent to get permission to speak with their children. The methodology includes administering a set of standardized questionnaires dealing with loss and depression as well as some open-ended questions. While this research may yield important information and insights, the IRB has concerns about privacy, the age of the subjects, risk levels, available support services, sample size, and whether there is any benefit to the potential subjects.

- *Why are these issues of concern when this is such a great idea?*

Case Three: Mentor/Trainees and Data Ownership³

Melissa is a 26 year old social work doctoral student in a in a large research university that values interdisciplinary research. She has had experience as an RA in one of the interdisciplinary research centers in the university and has made many positive professional relationships. She is highly regarded by faculty and her peers. She is thought of as ambitious, open-minded, fair and attentive to problems and a good person with whom to work. Her chair is a member of the social work faculty and has had no experience in multidisciplinary settings, although she is knowledgeable about Melissa's research interests and is supportive of her

¹ Case One developed by Phyllis Black, Marywood University (2007).

² Case Two developed by Sheldon R. Gelman, Yeshiva University (2007).

³ Case Three developed by Kay Hoffman, University of Kentucky (2007).

interests. Melissa chose Dr. Jones because of their similar interests in affecting public policy as a real outcome of research. Their relationship has been good during Melissa's course work, although Melissa always felt that Dr. Jones occasionally crossed boundaries or came close to it by asking questions about her personal life.

While working on her dissertation, Melissa continued working at the center and found an additional mentor in Dr. Brown, a sociologist in the center. After data were collected, Melissa met regularly with her chair and, separately, with Dr. Brown, who was not a member of her committee, in the interdisciplinary center. Melissa's association with Dr. Brown began when she sought her out about a particular kind of statistical technique she learned about from several doctoral students in sociology whose work in public policy was being supervised by Dr. Brown. Melissa thought their work was quite good conceptually and statistically and so she asked Dr. Brown for help which she willingly provided. After handing in a draft to Dr. Jones, which contained some new and novel changes, Dr. Jones asked about the source of these changes. Melissa stated these came about as a result of her work with Dr. Brown. Dr. Jones cautioned Melissa about working with the faculty members outside of social work and said that, at times like these, she feels that Melissa is going behind her back and that she should remember that Dr. Jones was her chair. Dr. Jones said there is an implicit understanding of "working together." Melissa decided that rather than risk the ire of her advisor, she would remove those changes suggested by Dr. Brown. Besides, Melissa's frame of mind had become somewhat fragile given the stress of the dissertation, impending job search, etc.

Melissa stopped talking about her work at the center and about the additional help she was receiving. She successfully defended and less than a year later published an article that contained the analysis suggested by Dr. Brown. She did not give credit to Dr. Jones nor did she include Dr. Jones as a co-author on the paper. She did acknowledge Dr. Brown because it was her help with some of the data analysis that most caught the eye of the reviewers. While Melissa and Dr. Jones had a tacit agreement that publications would include Dr. Jones, Melissa believed that this part of the dissertation did not belong to Dr. Jones in any form whatsoever. In addition, she did not believe the article would have been published if she had not included Dr. Brown's suggestions. Dr. Jones sees the article and accuses Melissa of breaking their prior agreement on publishing together. In addition, she accuses Melissa of withholding important findings in the study that could have been added to the dissertation that Dr. Jones approved, as did the entire committee. Dr. Jones reminds Melissa that any future publications based on the dissertation must include Dr. Jones as a co-author.

- *Do either Melissa or Dr. Jones have an ethical claim against the other? If yes, what? If no, why? What are the important points a case like this illustrates?*

Case Four: Authorship and Publication⁴

Jerry Smith, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of social work at the XYZ University. He is a new faculty who was immediately made Co-PI on an NIMH sponsored research project after being invited on the research team by a full professor of social work, Dr. Ronald Jones, who is the Principal Investigator. Dr. Jones has had many years of experience with state and federal grants, is widely published, and serves on

⁴ Case Four developed by James Clark, University of Kentucky (2007).

several federal review committees. He is also chair of the College of Social Work's Promotion & Tenure Committee, having served in that capacity for five years. He is PI on three R01 grants and two large state contracts at the university, and holds many appointments on national committees and associations. He travels a great deal as well. Other Co-PI's on the team include the chief of adult psychiatry for XYZ-U, a doctoral level clinical psychologist who is Dr. Jones' close friend, and two community social work administrators.

Over the past nine months, Jerry and the two administrators have been running the project, which involves testing the implementation of evidence-based practices in two social work agencies serving mentally ill persons. Dr. Jones has asked the team to meet monthly, and Jerry has chaired most of the meetings due to Dr. Jones' busy travel schedule. About two months ago Dr. Jones asked Jerry to draft a paper reporting the preliminary results from the project, which would ultimately be developed into a publication. Jerry worked closely with the administrators who helped him collect and enter the data; Jerry performed the analysis, and wrote up the Results and Conclusions. The administrators reviewed the draft and made substantive editorial revisions, enhancing the ecological validity of the study. After receiving a late and poorly written draft of the literature review from the clinical psychologist, Jerry revised that section himself. Right on deadline, he emailed the draft to Dr. Jones who acknowledged receipt.

Several weeks later, Jerry opened his email to find that Dr. Jones had submitted a slightly revised version of the paper to an extremely prestigious journal, which had accepted it with requests for minor revisions. Jerry was initially excited until he noted that Dr. Jones was listed as first author, Jerry as second, followed by the psychologist and psychiatrist. The two administrators were given a brief acknowledgement in a footnote. Jerry asked for a meeting with Dr. Jones, who appeared genuinely surprised by Jerry's distress. "What did you think, Jerry?" Dr. Jones said. "Of course, I am first author—I am the PI without whom there would have been no study. That's the way science works. And remember, I invited you on the project despite your lack of experience. Besides, I know the editor of this journal. Be happy--being second author in this journal is better than being first or even a solo author in a "B" or "C" level journal! And that will sure help your first year review that's coming up!" Jerry left the meeting still feeling terrible. He found a message from the agency administrators on his email stating that they liked the article and felt gratified with being acknowledged for their roles.

- *What authorship issues are raised by this case?*
- *Is Dr. Jones correct in his assertion that he has the rightful claim to full authorship?*
- *Are there conflicts of interest issues present in this case?*
- *What is your opinion regarding the treatment of the community administrators?*
- *What would be the proper resolution of this case?*
- *What steps might have been taken by the research team to prevent these problems in the first place, and to make the write-up of papers on this project more productive and fair?*