

CASE TEACHING NOTES for “A Rush to Judgment? A Case of Research Ethics and Design”

by

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INTRODUCTION

This directed case was designed for use in a sophomore-level research methods course as an introduction to the sections on ethics in research as well as research design. It could also be used in an introductory psychology course or in other introductory-level science courses as a critical thinking exercise illustrating the research process in science.

In this case, ethical issues associated with the treatment of research participants, the public misrepresentation of scientific research, and the supervision of student research assistants by faculty are explored through the eyes of the main characters. The main characters include two college students and a professor, all of whom will draw sympathy from readers because of the all-too-familiar hectic pace of their lives. By examining the way in which a research project was conducted, students also begin to explore the basic principles of good experimental design (e.g., equivalent groups, controlled testing environments).

One feature of this case is the ability to use it solely to discuss research ethics, to use it as a springboard for a discussion of experimental design, or for both purposes.

Objectives

Following examination and discussion of this case, the student should:

- understand the fundamental ethical principles that apply to research with human participants: informed consent, freedom from harm, freedom from coercion, anonymity, and confidentiality;
- understand the obligations of faculty and student researchers with respect to the participants, the research, and each other;
- be able to identify threats to internal validity in a research project; and
- be able to design an ethically as well as methodologically sound research project.

We believe that no pre-class preparation is necessary on the part of the students and do not assign readings for this topic. We assign the appropriate chapters in the students’ textbooks after the discussion to reinforce issues examined in the case. Other sources can also be introduced, such as the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html>).

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Case analysis can be completed in a 50-minute class period (as described below) if 10 minutes are spent on the initial reading and the instructor is careful to spend about five to 10 minutes on each of the questions.

(A) Students are given a copy of the case at the beginning of the class period and given about 10 minutes to read it. The case can be read aloud; however, an initial focus group consisting of faculty and students as well as students in our first use of the case indicated that this was not optimal as their attention tended to wander.

Optional—if the case is to be used in a research methods course after basic concepts have been covered, the instructor may wish to ask the following questions at this time.

- a. What type of design is being used?
- b. What are the independent variables?
- c. Is each manipulated or natural?
- d. What are the dependent variables?
- e. How are the variables operationalized?

(Answers to these optional questions are found at the end of the **answer key**).

(B) Ask students the first question: *What types of problems are inherent in Jolene's research project?* (For the answer to this and other questions posed in the case, see the **answer key**.) As students respond to each question in turn, their responses should be written down categorically. One strategy is to write methodological problems on one side of the blackboard and ethical problems on the other (assuming you are in a classroom with a large, double board spanning one wall). Another is to write the methodological and ethical problems on separate flip charts. Student assistants may be used to assist in the recording.

Optional—if this case is being used in a research methods course after students have learned the value of control over the independent variable and control of extraneous variables, you may wish to have students generate a list of ways in which the groups differ besides on the levels of the independent variable (e.g., testing environment). You may also have them label each of these differences as a type of threat to internal validity that is typically covered in research methods texts (e.g., selection).

(C) Ask students: *How did the problems you've identified affect the research results?* Write the results on the blackboard or on separate sheets of a flip chart.

(D) Ask students: *If Jolene could redo the study, what would you suggest that she do to solve the problems you have identified?* Write the results on the blackboard or separate sheets of a flip chart.

(E) Ask students: *What should Stefanie do?* Write responses on the board. Alternatively, you may wish to ask students to list all of the possible things that Stefanie could do.

As a follow-up, ask: *What are the consequences for her actions?* Write the students' responses next to each of the actions they listed above.

(F) Wrap-up by saying: *You have clearly identified a number of problems inherent in Jolene's research project. What do you think the consequences should be for Jolene? For Dr. Lee? For Stefanie?*

To summarize the case for the class, you can close with the following:

Today you have learned about the importance of ethical conduct in research and of proper adherence to research protocols on the validity of scientific results. In general, researchers should strive to treat their

participants ethically and groups should be as equivalent as possible. These two things are necessary to actually have some trust in your research results.

This summary could be referred to later as a springboard for discussion of threats to internal validity and Type I and Type II errors.

If your university has an honor code, your students may be more sensitive to the fact that Jolene's actions may have constituted a violation of your honor code.

In our experience, a limited number of students wanted to talk about Dr. Lee's role in the ethical violations of the case. The instructor may initiate a discussion of the tenure process and the influence of this incident on Dr. Lee's tenure status.

It has also been our experience that students tend to refer to Dr. Lee as a "he" even in departments in which there is an even, or female-heavy, gender distribution among faculty. If this is the case, the roles of women in science and the reasons for the students' gender attributions can be discussed.

Answer Key

Answers to the questions posed in the case study are provided in a separate answer key to the case. Those answers are password-protected. To access the answers for this case, go to **the key**. You will be prompted for a username and password. If you have not yet registered with us, you can see whether you are eligible for an account by reviewing our **password policy** and then apply online or write to **answerkey@sciencecases.org**.

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Internet

American Psychological Association Ethics Office
<http://www.apa.org/ethics/homepage.html>

This site contains a great deal of information on general ethical issues in psychological research as well as links to articles dealing with these issues (such as the Fine and Kurdek article).

Psi Chi, The National Honor Society in Psychology

<http://www.psichi.org>

The Slattery and Park article is available as well as other references and information about student-faculty research.

Council for Undergraduate Research

<http://www.cur.org>

This website contains a wealth of information about collaborations between undergraduate students and faculty mentors.

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