Karen Muskavitch's Commentary on "To Control or Not to Control?"

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There are two major issues in this case: 1) the role of the faculty members on a student's dissertation committee in advising, directing and approving the student's research, and 2) the potential conflict between Sherry's roles as researcher and as academic counselor. These issues are intertwined in the case, and their separate consideration should help participants in your discussion delineate the ethical issues and evaluate possible courses of action.

The role of the faculty members who serve on a student's dissertation committee is frequently not well defined. Ideally, they should guide the student's work so that the student develops expertise in the field of study and becomes an independent researcher. As the student progresses in the program, the faculty members' role will change along a continuum from teachers supervising a student to colleagues working in partnership with a peer. Sometimes it is difficult for all to agree on where the committee-student relationship is at a given time, and as a result there can be differences in expectations and miscommunications.

Dissertation committee members act as gatekeepers to the degree, but they must sometimes serve as advocates for students, ensuring that they are treated fairly and that their educational needs are met. The faculty members who train students in research have a responsibility to make sure that the students learn the body of knowledge needed by professionals in that field of study. They also have a responsibility to the students, the scientific community, and any research subjects to ensure that the students' research is ethically sound and scientifically useful.(1) The reason for using a *committee* is to avoid exploitation of the student, or advice from just one faculty member that might not represent the best experimental approach or that might not be in the student's best interests. Members of dissertation committees are intended to serve as checks on each other.

Normally, one of the members of the dissertation committee is the student'

research advisor and as such has the primary responsibility for directing the student's research. In a situation like this case, in which research with human subjects is involved, the faculty research adviser is also responsible for seeing that all regulations for the protection of human subjects are followed. In the event of a violation of these regulations, both the student researcher and the faculty research adviser can be sanctioned.

So, for a number of reasons, both educational and legal, faculty members need to have a significant role in determining the design of research involving human subjects. It is the degree and style of the guidance from the members of the dissertation committee that are problematic in this case. Is the committee being unduly dictatorial in its insistence on a no-intervention control group? Have they seriously considered other research designs? Have they considered the ethical implications of the proposed experimental design? Has Sherry seriously researched and considered other experimental designs? Has she made a well-reasoned case for her design to the committee? Did she talk over the experimental design with her research adviser before presenting it to the entire committee? Are Sherry and the committee really listening to each other? We have very little information about the group dynamics involved in this scenario, but they are important considerations for Sherry as she tries to decide what to do next. Here is an opportunity to play with the details of the case. Propose different scenarios for Sherry's interaction with the committee (for example: The committee just rubber stamps whatever Professor A says is the way things should be done, or Sherry has not looked into and will not consider any design other than her proposed pre- and post-intervention GPA evaluation.), and then brainstorm ways that Sherry could try to break the impasse. For instance, assuming that Sherry has already done her homework on various experimental designs, she might choose one member of the committee to talk with one-on-one in order to work out a compromise with one faculty member as a starting point to convincing the entire committee. The various proposed courses of action could then be evaluated, and your discussion group could then consider plans on how to put the proposal into action.

In evaluating different experimental designs, it will be essential to consider whether they are consistent with ethical standards, and thus one must consider the potential conflict of interest each might introduce into Sherry's relationships with the students she counsels.

In the Belmont Report, the National Commission asserted that "It is important to

distinguish between biomedical and behavioral research, on the one hand, and the practice of accepted therapy on the other, in order to know what activities ought to undergo review for the protection of human subjects of research. . . . Research and practice may be carried on together when research is designed to evaluate the safety and efficacy of a therapy."(2) So it is not simply the coincidence of intervention and research by Sherry that is problematic. It is possible for Sherry to act in both the role of researcher and counselor to the students with whom she works, but the students must be aware of the dual nature of her role and must freely consent to being subjects in her experiment. Regardless of how the study is designed, Sherry will need to submit her protocol to her institutional review board and include her plans to obtain the students' informed and uncoerced consent, and protect their confidentiality. She will also need to allow the students to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences.(3) Meeting these requirements will take thoughtful planning, especially ensuring that the students do not feel that they *ought* to agree to be part of Sherry's study if they want to take her study skills course.

However, the problematic part of the experimental design for Sherry and her dissertation committee has to do with the way in which she will evaluate the efficacy of her intervention with the study skills course. Sherry appears to want to minimize the effect of her research on the students with whom she works by simply looking at GPAs for students before and after the course. She is emphasizing the ethical concerns and is reluctant to offer any of her students anything less than what she believes to be the best intervention. The dissertation committee, on the other hand, seems to be emphasizing the scientific concern for producing the most clear-cut result possible from the experiment. Neither concern is irrelevant, and concern that the experiment yield meaningful results is also an ethical concern.(4)

What the committee proposes is the educational equivalent of a randomized clinical trial testing the effectiveness of an experimental treatment relative to a nontreatment or placebo control. The IRB Guidebook states that "the justifying pre-condition for ethical use of randomization is that a hypothesis (*i.e.*, the stated experimental hypothesis that the experimental and control conditions have equally beneficial effect) can be reasonably entertained" and that "the use of placebos is generally unacceptable if there is an effective therapy that the subjects could be receiving for relief of severe symptoms or amelioration of a serious condition." In most cases today, the experimental treatment is evaluated relative to the

conventional treatment rather than to no treatment at all. Also, one might argue that being in danger of being dismissed from college is a "serious condition,"(5) and a study skills course is an "effective therapy" that some of the students should not be randomly denied just so that a scientific study can be done. However, if it were clear that the proposed study skills course would be effective, then there would be no research question to be investigated. It may be necessary to review the literature again to determine the amount of uncertainty being tested in Sherry's proposal. Even if the hypothesis condition for randomization cannot be met, there may be other ways to identify a control population, although there may be associated problems for interpretation of the data (for example: at-risk students who self-select not to take the course, or at-risk students at a similar school that does not offer such a course).

In addition to the question of whether a nonintervention group is ethically justifiable, there is the potential conflict of roles and interest for Sherry. Is it acceptable to her employer that she experiment with the counseling and intervention that she does with the at-risk students she is to serve? Will she be able to be clear with the students and with herself as to when she is acting as counselor and when she is acting as researcher? Could the fact that she is conducting research connected with her work dissuade some students from seeking her help? The close linkage of her job and her research could also pose a conflict of interest. She may act or advise some students in such a way as to further her research goals over the best interests of the students. Further, bias could be introduced into her analyses of the research data because of interactions with some of the students. It may be too difficult to ensure that she is fulfilling her obligations as academic counselor *and* researcher, if she is doing research on the same students that she counsels.

Careful consideration of all these issues and design of the research protocol with the guidance of her committee members to minimize the difficulties will be essential, or her research may simply need to be separate from her employment.

- (1)American Psychological Association, Section 6.06 Planning Research in Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, Effective December 1, 1992; American Educational Research Association, Section VI, Guiding Standards: Students and Student Researchers in Ethical Standards of AERA, http://www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.htm.
- (2)National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical

and Behavioral Research. The Belmont Report, Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. April 18, 1979, http://grants.nih.gov/grants/oprr/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.htm.

- (3)Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Department of Health and Human Services, Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects,1991 and 1994, http://www.med.umich.edu/irbmed/FederalDocuments/hhs/HHS45CFR46.html#46.111.
- (4)APA, Ethical Principles.
- (5)Office for Protection from Research Risk, National Institutes of Health, Institutional Review Board Guidebook, 1993 http://grants.nih.gov/grants/oprr/irb.