



Cases in Research and Teaching Ethics

A Review of

Ethical Challenges in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences: Case Studies and Commentaries

by Robert J. Sternberg and Susan T. Fiske (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

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All psychologists have faced ethical challenges during their professional careers. I suspect that most of us have made a mistake or two, minor or major, and wish we might have done things differently had we been more aware of our circumstances. In *Ethical Challenges in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences: Case Studies and Commentaries* most chapter authors confess to their mistakes, explain why the challenge was difficult, how they resolved it, and provide suggestions for what they could have done and others might do to avoid similar challenges.

The book is divided into 11 parts. Coeditor Susan Fiske provides a brief commentary after each part. In a concluding epilogue, Robert Sternberg provides a helpful model for meeting ethical challenges. The first two parts concern issues in teaching. The remaining parts cover various aspects of the research process including design, use of human subjects, authorship credit, and manuscript review and editing. The organization is a bit confusing; there are too many parts, some with related topics that are separated in the table of contents, for example, Part III on authorship and Part X on publication.

Authors were selected by taking every 6th person from a list of fellows of the American Psychological Society (personal communication from the editors, April 16, 2015). It appears that authors were asked to present an ethical challenge they had faced rather than having a list of important ethical issues and then finding individuals who had experience confronting those issues. The result is that some parts have two or three cases on the same topic with other critical issues missing.

For several years I taught a course on ethics and professional issues for students in our experimental and organizational psychology graduate programs. Discussion of specific cases was central to our discussions. Had this book been available I would have found many of the

cases to be particularly useful. I will highlight some of these cases and discuss the usefulness of this book.

Academic Teaching Issues

Various forms of cheating (Part I) and extra credit and grading (Part II) make up much of the content in these sections. Of course cheating on exams and plagiarism are wrong. The problem is catching the cheaters and then being willing to confront the issue, sometimes in the face of minimal administrative support. The ethical dilemma often is whether to take the easy way out and ignore the problem, which was the advice given to one of the authors. A general lesson that should be gained from this section is the importance of preparation and prevention.

Points are the coin of the realm for students. Points determine grades and students will negotiate to get more points. One way is to request "extra credit." An ethical problem of fairness arises when not all students have this opportunity as illustrated in William Buskist's case (#5). He learned that having a clear policy stated at the beginning is the best way to prevent later problems.

The bottom line is the grade. Instructors provide an illusion of objectivity by quantifying cut-offs for grade levels and then are faced at semester's end with students who missed an A by one point and say they now are less likely to get into medical school. James Nairne's case (#8) clearly shows the subjective nature of grade cut-offs and the pressure on faculty to bow to student's needs. Nairne changed a grade to potentially save a career; "the grading process will sometimes put you at odds with objective notions of fairness" (p. 24).

Among the many academic issues missing from this section are dual relationships with students, avoiding controversial topics in class discussions, and teaching courses in areas outside one's specialty. See Landrum and McCarthy (2012) for a recent source in this area.

Research Issues

Cheating, again, is an issue in research and, as in teaching, the major problems are detecting it and being willing to confront it. This is where the pressure to produce publishable results is most apparent. The cases in Part VII concern fabrication of data. In the quest for significant results it is tempting to change a few numbers and forget about an outlier, and no one will know or even bother to check. It is not easy to find patterns in the data (Case 41) and even more difficult to confront someone, perhaps a trusted assistant (Case 40). Scott Lilienfeld's (#38) and Michael Strube's cases (#42) are especially effective in showing the challenge and emotional costs of blowing the whistle on powerful persons.

Treatment of human subjects in research has received considerable attention, especially since Stanley Milgram's obedience studies. APA and other organizations publish guidelines and institutional review boards are charged with monitoring ethics in this area. (See Ittenbach & Corsmo, 2015, for a review of a recent revision intended to make life easier for social scientists.) Part VIII has three cases on research with children, the primary issues being confidentiality and consent from parents. There is a relatively long discussion (Case 45) of the BBC documentary replicating the Stanford Prison Experiment and raising the

question of whether *not* conducting research on controversial issues is unethical. Another case (#50) involved a researcher who joined a neo-Nazi web site to collect data without obtaining consent from the members. Is it acceptable to be unethical with bad people? In her commentary, Fiske points out the trade-offs that are made between the rights of subjects and benefits to society.

Publication

Order of authorship counts a lot in important academic decisions. In reviewing a vita, we assume that first authors had more responsibility for the most significant aspects of the research than did others farther down the list. On the face of it this would not seem to be an ethical challenge. If this was my idea, and I designed the study and wrote the article, I would be the first author. Of course, the situation is not always that clear and a powerful person can seize the glory.

Part III on authorship is the longest section of the book with eleven cases. Coeditor Fiske says this topic "topped the list in our nonsystematic sample of invitees' choices to write about ethical issues in psychological science" (p. 68). In the medical sciences it is not uncommon for a powerful lab director to take first authorship credit without doing any work other than supporting the lab with grants. That's life so live with it in medicine but not in psychology. Other cases in this part include a thesis advisor and a senior colleague who take the credit. There may not be much that the disadvantaged can do in these situations, but the cases could be instructive for administrators who monitor faculty records. Stephen Kosslyn (Case 17) presents a list of criteria with points for determining order of authorship that could be useful to prevent later disputes.

Data waste is often overlooked as an ethical issue. Cases of an unpublished dissertation and another of a graduate who cannot be found are instructive here. Some graduate students are just happy to get the research and writing out of the way. Why is that unethical? "[B]ecause it fails to meet the contracts between the investigator and the research participant" (p. 60). Consent forms typically state how society may benefit from subjects' participation. That cannot happen if society is not informed of the results.

Ethical issues may not be over even for honest scientists who have worked out authorship issues. There also are challenges in the reviewing and editing stages of publication. Suppose that after submitting an article you find out that you made a mistake in the statistical analysis (Case 27). Then there is the challenge of the biased or careless reviewer and one who wants to take your idea or data.

Case #60 is a relatively long description of the "Rind, et al. Affair" (p. 186). The publication of a meta-analysis of the long-term effects of child sexual abuse became a political issue that reached the United States Congress. Although few publications will have this kind of impact, the case is instructive in making readers aware that research can find its way into the public eye. The authors give suggestions to prevent serious publicity problems, including getting comments from "likely dissenting experts" (p. 189).

Is This a Useful Book?

Many of the cases in this book would be useful for discussion in an ethics course or sections of other courses. However, many other cases deal with minor issues, are redundant, or seem more like complaints. Rather than asking a random sample of APS fellows to choose their own topics, the editors and their seven person board might have decided on important challenges and search for authors who had confronted those challenges. The book also is surprisingly short on references to other casebooks or general texts on ethical issues in psychology. Inserting "ethical issues psychology" into any search engine would yield plenty of good discussion material. If the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences, the sponsoring organization for this book, wanted to provide a useful "compendium" (p. xvii) it might have asked for contributions and posted cases online.

References

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