Author's Commentary on "Research on Linguistic Profiling of Terrorists"

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Research on Linguistic Profiling of Terrorists

Although this case involves a specific experiment in psycholinguistic research, several general ethical questions are addressed that can be applied to work outside of the area, including risk assessment, formation of the informed consent, subject selection, credit/participation, and reporting to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). To aid in this treatment, the American Psychological Association (APA)'s *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* will be consulted as the ethical standard of this field. APA guidelines consist of five overarching principles that are meant to be general and aspirational coupled with ethical standards that are meant to address specific incidences that may arise in the course of psychological research. This commentary will address Part 1 and Part 2 of the case study in turn.

Part 1

Part 1 introduces the experimental situation and raises background issues that may arise with research of this sort. The following are several themes that can be elaborated upon in discussion. Underlying these themes is a more general moral tension that runs throughout this case concerning the obligations of a researcher to science and their obvious need to protect the rights of their subjects.

Risk assessment

The APA's ethical standard 3.04 (Avoiding Harm) states that researchers must "take reasonable steps to avoid harming their clients/patients, students, supervisees, research participants, organizational clients, and others with whom they work, and to minimize harm where it is foreseeable and unavoidable." This scenario, however, is meant to provoke thought on this standard when the appropriate level of safeguarding in an experimental situation is less than obvious. In Sophia's case,

the literature provides no guidelines for use of a negative role-playing task. Research suggests that writing about negative events may be harmful, but it is not clear that that is what subjects are doing. How should researchers assess such situations? What are the "reasonable steps" that could be taken to minimize harm if the experiment should be allowed to proceed?

Also underlying this dilemma is the role of the experimenter in making these judgment calls and in deciding whether the benefit of the research outweighs its potential risk. Question 1 challenges this role. Further discussion can center on the position of the IRB versus the professional responsibilities that are placed upon members of academia. For example, APA explains that their guidelines were purposely written in such a way as to allow professional judgment on the part of psychologists (stated in introduction). How does this judgment come into play when ethical dilemmas arise? When should potential biases be protected against? In other words, how much responsibility should be given solely to the investigator rather than to a governing board such as the IRB?

Informed consent

An important concern in this study lies in the formation of the informed consent. This is raised early on in the fact that the data are intended for development of government technology. It is plausible that some subjects would not want to participate in such an endeavor. An obvious course of action would be to include this information in the informed consent. However, this may change the results substantially and affect the benefit such research has on homeland security. Other issues may be brought up in discussion that stem from this problem. For example, what if the scenario is slightly changed such that the experiment is being funded by these agencies and they put this information under security clearance? Does this change the moral obligations of the researcher from that of subject to country? Should the experiment not be run if subjects cannot know the use of their data? Would it be enough to let subjects know of this restriction?

An additional issue concerning informed consent formation raised in this case lies again in the potential risks students face from participation in this task and how much information concerning this should be divulged. This is a classic ethical dilemma when conducting research (applicable also to the previous issue). On one hand subjects have the right to know what they are agreeing to do. APA ethical standards dictate that researchers must inform participants of any "reasonably

foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects" (ethical standard 8.02a). However, if the task is divulged the experiment may be jeopardized. The argument from the literature for a potential risk is not very strong, but does this matter? Where is the line and who decides this? When does it become necessary to include hypothetical problems in an informed consent?

Subject selection

A third general issue addressed in this case deals with subject selection and recruitment. Question 3 raises issues concerning screening and use of students as subjects. Use of language groups, though seemingly innocent, sometimes involves separation of ethnic groups (in this case: Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian). Combined with the essay topics (terrorism and crime), this may cause discomfort in participants just by its implications. What are the ethical responsibilities of a researcher in this situation? Additionally, the vulnerability of students as subjects can also be addressed in discussion at this point. Should they be treated with more care than other sampling populations?

This scenario also touches on the use of incentives. Having the experiment fulfill all of the student's course requirements induces students to want to participate (leading to problems like those seen in Part 2). APA's recommendation for use of inducements seems inappropriate for this situation in stating that psychologists must "make reasonable efforts to avoid offering excessive or inappropriate financial or other inducements for research participation when such inducements are likely to coerce participation" (ethical standard 8.06a). The current incentive is not excessive. But, is it coercive? An interesting point for discussion centers around the potential distinction between personal ethical choices and principles laid out by an institution. Is simply following standard guidelines enough? What if these guidelines do not specifically address the moral issue in question?

Part 2

Part 2 is concerned not so much with experiment preparation as in Part 1, but with issues that may arise during the experimental situation. More specifically, the problems Sophia faces concern subject credit/participation and reporting to the IRB.

Credit and participation

Sophia, in managing the concerns and behavior of the participant, chooses to refuse him full credit and participation in her study. Was this the correct solution? APA guidelines state that when the concerns of the researcher are in conflict, they must "attempt to resolve these conflicts in a responsible fashion that avoids or minimizes harm" (Principle A). Is this what occurred? Did Sophia let her personal annoyance get in the way of resolving the situation peacefully? Challenge students in discussion to come up with alternative courses of action along with the pros and cons of each.

Reporting to the IRB

Several concerns arise when considering the role of the IRB in this case study. The crux of the dilemma lies in whether or not Sophia should report the incident with the offending participant. Doing so would jeopardize her research and its use, yet provide a safeguard against potential future harm of participants as well as provide a second opinion on a judgment that is potentially biased. This raises two topics for discussion. First, how much information needs to be given to the IRB? What qualifies as a harmful situation? Second, should researchers rely on their own subjective judgment? What about experimenter bias? Are there ever situations where experimenters can rely on their own judgment calls? In the discussion, it might be interesting to highlight the conflict between thorough reporting and wasting the IRB's (usually taxed) resources.

The IRB is not only in place to protect the participants, but the experimenters as well. A second thread of discussion—not often addressed—concerns the potential harm that researchers face in some experimental situations. Sophia was bullied by the male participant and sexually harassed. Is this something she should report to the IRB as well? Is the task designed in such a way that these situations may reasonably arise in the future? Should the experiment be re-evaluated for her safety as well? Should she make this decision or allow the IRB to decide?

References

- American Psychological Association. 2002. *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct.* http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html.