

Title: Power for the People

Author: William Timberlake, in *Research Ethics: Cases and Materials*, edited by Robin Levin Penslar, Indiana University Press, 1995

Description: Professor A proposes to test the theory that black male criminals suffer from early childhood deprivation of attention by the male parent by comparing interviews of black male ex-convicts with men that have never been convicted of a crime matched on socioeconomic status, intact versus disrupted family, and presence versus absence of alternative male figures. This case illustrates the conflicts that can arise when a behavioral researcher's hypotheses and study questions may be perceived to be based upon stereotypes and the importance of involving local communities in the research process.

Headings: Special Populations and Cultural Competence; Community or consumer representation; Racial and ethnic minorities

Case Type: Decision making

Power for the People

Based on her experience and the smattering of data in the literature, Professor A proposed the theory that black male criminals suffer from early childhood deprivation by attention by the male parent. She proposed to test her theory by comparing interviews of male ex-convicts with a group of men who had never been convicted of a crime matched on socioeconomic status, intact versus disrupted family, and presence versus absence of alternative male figures. To avoid basing her conclusions on potentially self-serving statements by the subjects, she also proposed to interview the parents and teachers of the subjects, many of whom she would have to track down.

A neighborhood group, Power for the People, filed a complaint with the university and the APA Ethics Committee claiming that the study was racist, coercive, designed to discredit the black community, harmful to the reputations of the families involved, and intended simply to advance Professor A's career without any concern for the people she might be damaging. They also argued that neither the university nor the APA Ethics Committee had the right to approve the research because neither committee's membership included any oppressed racial minorities (although both committees did include women and Asian Americans) and because the research took place in the black community. In their view, only the people from the community had the right to approve the research, and not the university.

In her defense, Professor A argued before the IRB that her purpose was to help, not harm; her long term involvement with minority groups on campus had led her to this research, not hope for personal aggrandizement. If the data supported her hypothesis, she planned to apply for funding from the federal government to set up a program to help develop alternative male figures for families in the community. She also stated that she planned to speak with responsible community leaders about contacting family members, but that there was no single neighborhood or community that could be responsible for approving the research. She closed her remarks with the impassioned appeal, "If a perceived imbalance in power necessarily produces coercion and a victim, and these outcomes are

viewed as more negative than any general long-term benefits that might accrue, the study and subsequent education of humans by any but novelists, talk show hosts, and comics cannot go forward.”

Should the university allow this study to go forward as proposed?

Questions for Further Reflection

Would it alter your conclusion if the university added one or more black community members to the IRB for the evaluation of this proposal, and required Professor A to form a community advisory group that would have a veto power over the study? Should all research studies have a specific advisory group drawn from the population being studied? (Note that the federal regulations allow IRBs to consult with non-IRB members when appropriate to ensure that subjects who are vulnerable are adequately protected. Consultants may not, however, vote on the approval of protocols. IRBs may add members who are knowledgeable about and experienced in working with particular populations as necessary to ensure that the interests of subjects are protected. (45 Code of Federal Regulations 46.107))

Is Professor A’s race relevant to your analysis?

Would it make a difference to your analysis if the university and Professor A committed themselves to assisting the community to develop an appropriate intervention program if the results of the study appeared to warrant it?

Would you view the study differently if the subject of the study were different? For example:

- What if the hypothesis concerned mentally ill blacks instead of ex-convicts?
- What if the hypothesis concerned blacks who had been successful in starting their own business?
- What if the study concerned homosexuals instead of blacks?

Consider Professor A’s concluding remarks to the IRB. Are they self-serving, or do they raise a significant issue?