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Research Ethics: More Than Just Words

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During my first two years at Fordham University, I realized the opportunity was before me to pursue my academic interests more so than I would ever have the chance to again. But I wanted more than just academic pursuits, I needed something that allowed me to give back to the community at the same time. Even in the more theoretical fields of math and computer science, the diverse array of research operations available in the undergraduate college allowed me to find a project that suited my skill set and more community-focused goals. I joined in a research project to create a public resource information phone application for the Bronx community, using techniques and software developed by IBM. All seemed to be on the right path and I found myself comfortably sitting at the intersection of academic success and social outreach.

However, the moral strength of the project slowly came into question. As the project progressed, I slowly came aware of the project's real focus. While from the outside, the professor and the group of student researchers appeared to had championed this project for the good of the community, the real purpose was to experiment and learn to handle the software that the Fordham Computer Science Department had been provided by IBM. The team, under the direction of the professor, chose not to use software practices they were familiar with in order to have a legitimate excuse to tinker with the IBM software. After two years of observing the slow pace of the project and the lack of actual attention on the Bronx community, I left the team.

Was this project unethical? Was there any potential wrongdoing done by former research team due to their ulterior motives? The argument could be made that no direct harm was done to the community, but in the context of a set of basic ethical principles, I regrettably find that the answer to these questions is yes. One of the premier sources for the foundations of ethics in research is the Belmont Report from 1978, and of main importance in this report are the ethical

principles of beneficence and justice. Beneficence is the principle of research ethics that goes beyond simply avoiding causing harm to research subjects, but “making efforts to secure their well-being” (National Commission 4). To put it simply, for a research project to be beneficent, it must actually do some form of good for the subjects. As for the principle of justice, this standard can be described as ensuring that no “benefit to which a person is entitled is denied without good reason” (National Commission 5). In layman's terms, justice is making sure everyone involved in the project get what they deserves.

Regrettably, I do not believe that my former research project lives up to the standard of beneficence. The project’s excessive focus on using a special software prevented the project from running in a productive or useful manner. Because of this inefficiency, no good came to the local Bronx community, and they did not receive their application for social resources. More so than not just receiving the application, the community was delayed from getting this application from other sources, as they entrusted the task to the Fordham research team and waited patiently as the team pursued their own ends. Despite whatever benefit the team gained from getting to use the more advanced IBM software, this research project failed the Bronx community as a whole, for not once was the consideration made to put aside the more complex IBM software and create an application that would actually benefit the local community in a timely manner. The research team neglected to “maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms” (National Commission 5), and so, the principle of beneficence was ignored.

Justice, ensuring that everybody is treated equally, was not maintained either. The definition of justice requires some good reason to validate the research team from failing to provide a satisfactory resource application to the community. Some researchers (though not I)

might try to argue that the experience gained through the use of the IBM software helped the student researchers develop abilities that not only give them marketable technical skills in the instance of a job application, but also give them kills that help them more efficiently develop resource applications in the future.

However, the comparison cannot be made between what should have a guaranteed and immediate benefit for an already disenfranchised community and the solely theoretical and potential option of an easier job search for a college student and unlikely condition of a better redo in the future. The situation also holds eerie similarities to the unethical practices of research in prisons and hospitals that targeted the poor and vulnerable as research subjects, with more concern of advancing the researcher's own goals than actually helping the research subjects with the abilities the researchers already possessed. In the context of another unethical medical test performed on the poor, the Belmont Report states that "these subjects were deprived of demonstrably effective treatment in order not to interrupt the project" (National Commission 6), which parallels directly to my experience, merely subbing out the word "treatment" for "research app." No proper reasoning can explain why the Bronx community did not receive the application they expected so I fully describe this project as unjust.

The presence of such an unbeneficent and unjust project at Fordham University is concerning. A project with an ethical end goal should not be waylaid by the presence of more selfish ulterior motives. If this project was approved by a research ethics board, I find the only reason this would have been passed would be the misunderstanding of the technical requirements (or lack thereof) of such a resource application. This misunderstanding of technology is not the fault of the ethics board, but again, the fault of the research team for not detailing what would be

needed to make a practical application. This is a two-fold violation of the ethical necessity of comprehension (National Commission 7), setting the project on the foundations of deceit. Deception is a frequent problem in research communities, and is commonly considered a "sociological sin" (Allen 2). All else set aside, and that's setting aside quite a lot, the Bronx community looked to Fordham as a friend and helper, and we let them think that helping them was our true motive.

As common as deception is in research, it is just as common for those who practice deception in research to hold no qualms about their unethical practices. I found this out myself as I saw no one else feel any remorse about the misguided nature of the research. The most regret I saw amongst any other team member was regarding the difficulty of using the IBM software. I'm sure my former research team would fall in lockstep with the common defense of deception: "If the deception doesn't hurt anyone very much and the payoff in data is high, cover research is worth doing" (Allen 2). Researchers do not thoroughly have a consensus about deception, with "few sociologists [believing] in hard-and-fast bans on covert research" (Allen 7), so perhaps even this abuse of the Bronx community's trust could be seen as an acceptable loss in order to gain research experience.

But I would like to think that Fordham's research has more ethics than that. If a cost or risk analysis of a research project has to be debated in the first place, the ethics are at least ambiguous and more likely than not unethical. I hope that future research projects at this university receive a little more initial scrutiny to make sure that no one again needs to so closely question the ethics behind Fordham's research.

Works Cited

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