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10 Minute Presentation on Ethical Conflicts in Client-Driven Research
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For my presentation, I propose to focus on some of the contexts in which I have conducted client-driven research: as a university professor supervising student research; as a university researcher; and as a government employee. I will place the most emphasis on the first context, but for each I will illustrate the potential for ethical conflicts related to research objectivity.

As a university professor, I work with the benefit of academic freedom, but when doing client-driven research this privilege is not absolute. The potential to have one's objectivity compromised also presents itself when the work is being conducted by students. Three years ago, I approached the mayor and town manager of what was then the Town of Lennoxville, Quebec to explore the possibility for students in my urban planning course to conduct applied research for the town government. At the time, I was a new faculty member with one of the local universities in the Sherbrooke metropolitan area. Both of them were enthusiastic about the offer and immediately asked if I would be willing to have my students conduct a random attitudinal survey of residents about a proposal by the provincial government to merge several suburban municipalities, including Lennoxville, with the City of Sherbrooke. I agreed and immediately started preparations to organize the course around the project. Though I was excited about this opportunity for myself and my students, I was initially concerned about the objectivity of the study given that the clients had understandable, but nonetheless definite, opinions about the focus and outcome of the study. In short, both would surely lose their jobs if a municipal merger were to occur. They clearly had a stake in the outcome of the research.

On the first day of class I explained the project to my students and nearly all of them were enthusiastic about it. A few of the students already knew about the project and had enrolled in the course because of it. As I discussed it with my students, it immediately became obvious to me that as third and fourth year university students in a university town, they too had definite opinions about the subject of the study. Of the 12 students who worked on the project, all of them had sincere concerns about how a merger with Sherbrooke might change the character of Lennoxville and several of them were quite vocal in their objections to the proposal as a heavy handed attack by the provincial government on weak local governments. Moreover, several of the students were from suburban Toronto municipalities which had recently been merged in spite of vehement criticism by the public and the media.

The situation appeared to present quite a dilemma for me as a researcher and a teacher; on the one hand, this was an ideal opportunity for urban planning students to conduct applied research that had the potential to make a difference to them and their community, but on the other hand I had not only a client with a vested interest in the outcome, but also a team of 12 students who were going into the project with a similar lack of objectivity. I immediately approached the town manager about my concerns (with an emphasis on my concerns about the students, of course!) and pressed the point that the

study would only be useful to the town government in its negotiations with the provincial government if it was seen to be objective. He agreed completely and we quickly began brainstorming ways of ensuring this.

To minimize the potential for students to influence the respondents, I organized a municipal merger debate which each of them participated in before they were allowed to administer the questionnaires. The intent was to equip them with a balanced view of the pros as well as the cons of mergers. The town manager also agreed to meet with the students to explain that like them he had his own concerns about the merger, but he also stressed the point that the study would only be useful if it was objective. He went on to explain that he and I had agreed to limit the survey to permanent residents in order to avoid the potential and the perception of the results being skewed by respondents who were university students. This was achieved by using a list of registered voters rather than the phone directory. The students were also required to sign a statement that they would not divulge any information from the voting list, or compromise the confidentiality of respondents or alter any of the results. Finally, in addition to the questionnaire which was developed and edited jointly by my students, the mayor, town manager and me, we developed a brochure that explained which services were provided locally by the Town of Lennoxville and which ones were provided regionally (see handout). When the students went door to door administering the surveys, they handed out the brochures along with letters from the mayor and me. Only after the respondents had read the brochure and letters were the students allowed to administer the questionnaire.

When the project was completed, I had 240 completed surveys and 12 student reports to compile into a report to the Town government. I was concerned about the results from two of my students, so I eliminated their data even though it reduced the level of expressed opposition to the merger proposal from 88 percent somewhat or strongly opposed to 85 percent. Though I cannot be completely sure about the objectivity of the student researchers, I do know that I ensured it to the best of my ability and that the results seemed to be consistent with how most Lennoxville residents were reacting to the proposal. There were nonetheless some interesting differences between English speaking and French speaking residents and between homeowners and renters that were revealed by the fact that we stratified the sample according to these sub-populations in addition to selecting respondents randomly. Francophones and renters, while generally opposed to the merger proposal, did not object as strongly as Anglophones and homeowners and were more likely to agree to give up local control over particular services (especially fire protection, cultural services and community services) short of a complete merger.

In the following spring, several faculty members at Bishop's University and Université de Sherbrooke, including myself, organized a colloquium on municipal mergers with academics and local officials. Judging by the comments and questions of members of the public who attended the event, local people were still strongly opposed to the idea. Nonetheless, the merger became law and went into effect in January 2002 for Montreal, Quebec City and several other metropolitan areas, including Sherbrooke.

In spite of the potential for conflict in client-driven research as a professor with academic freedom, the concern is greater in other contexts. Before I completed my PhD, I conducted program evaluations (policy implementation studies) as a policy analyst with U.S. EPA and prior to that while working for a local government research center based at University of Maryland. Both situations presented the potential for ethical conflict, especially the one with EPA. Both situations also required similar solutions to minimize the problem: to select clients with as high a rank as possible. With program evaluation, the potential for conflict is especially high when working with people who work on the program that is being evaluated. As a result, it is especially important to select a client who has as an interest in knowing how well the program is working, whether there are any particular problems and what the apparent solutions might be. One way is to select someone who is responsible for larger policy matters that include, but are not exclusive to, particular programs. Another way is to select more than one client, preferably several high ranking individuals who form a panel that oversees the study, examines its findings and takes the responsibility to develop its own recommendations to the program. In effect, the panel leverages the influence of the research. The first method is usually the only one available and is in many cases quite effective. When possible, the panel approach is advisable though it requires a considerable investment on the part of the program itself, as well as the researchers and the panel members.