

Case Study Protocol

1. Ethical issue(s).

Identify the ethical issue or issues presented in your case study.

2. Possible courses of action.

Indicate possible actions the key individual might take to resolve this issue.

3. Recommended choice.

Of these, which one do you feel that person should take?

4. Support your choice.

Provide the rationale for your choice. Indicate what the consequences are if this choice is made, both for the key individual and others.

5. Reflection

What lessons can you learn / take away from this case study?

At What Point Should a Scientist Intervene?

Lee Feld, graduate student
Laura Smith, human subject
Josiah Smith, Laura Smith's son

Graduate student Lee Feld is working on their dissertation. Lee has been in the field working on an ethnography about how parents and guardians discipline their children, and the differences in discipline across race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Lee has been in the field for eight months and has one more month to go. Lee has conducted observations and interviews with numerous families and has also been doing intensive observations with a smaller number of families.

One of the families in the intensive observation sample is the Smith family. Laura Smith is a single mother with three children. Ms. Smith frequently spansks her children and when she deems their behavior to be particularly negative, uses a belt or a paddle. From what Lee has learned in Lee's research this is not uncommon for families like the Smiths. One day, Lee is at the Smith residence when 8-year-old Josiah Smith comes home from school with a letter from his teacher. The letter notes that Josiah is going to be suspended for three days for beating up a classmate. Josiah's mom tells Josiah that she is going to teach him a lesson; she says that if he knew what being hurt feels like maybe he would not hurt others again in the future. Ms. Smith and Josiah go into the bedroom. When they come out Lee notices a patterned bruise mark on the back of Josiah's neck that looks like it matches the belt Ms. Smith sometimes uses for punishment.

Should Lee report Ms. Smith to Family Services? Lee promised all research participants privacy and confidentiality, particularly because Lee knew that the subject matter is a sensitive issue – discipline in the home. Lee is worried about Josiah and thinks Josiah's mom may have crossed the line and committed child abuse. However, this is the first time Lee has noticed any discipline in the Smith home that may have crossed the line to illegal behavior. Maybe Lee was mistaken in what Lee thinks Lee saw. Lee is there to observe families and to share findings with the broader community. Lee is there as a scientist to observe and was invited in to the Smith's home and does not see how intervention fits into that role. In fact, Lee has ready many studies in Lee's field that involve researchers studying people engaged in illegal activities who did not report these activities. If Lee does call Family Services, Ms. Smith may drop out of Lee's study and Lee will have 8 more months of fieldwork to complete as Lee will need to do intensive observations with another family that fits into Ms. Smith's category. Plus, if Lee observes possible child abuse happening again, is Lee going to continue to report it again, entering a cycle, and never finish the field work necessary for Lee's dissertation? How can Lee do a research assignment if Lee is instead playing the role of social worker? Lee wonders whether there is more public good created from helping Josiah, if Family Services even does anything, or from publishing the dissertation that documents what Lee believes is not unique to the Smith household. How should Lee proceed?

Analysis

Privacy, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent: The researcher has been invited into a private space, the participant's home, to observe their everyday life. The participant has voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and has been guaranteed a high degree of confidentiality. Even if there were specific exceptions on the informed consent form, the participant may not have fully understood these exceptions, has developed trust with the researcher, and been orally assured by the researcher that the researcher is not there to judge, just to observe and learn, and that anything the researcher learns or observes from the study will be kept confidential.

Child welfare, state law compliance

Children are a vulnerable population and require special protection. The researcher suspects child abuse in the case of Josiah Smith. In New Hampshire, everyone is legally considered a mandatory reporter if they witness child abuse or neglect. If the researcher ignores a situation of potential child abuse, it could continue and/or get worse in the future.

Beneficence

The researcher should minimize risks for participants. If the researcher was not doing this ethnography, the family would not be at risk of possibly being split up. The other side of beneficence is maximizing benefits. Could Josiah's life improve if Lee reports the situation to Family Services? The integrity of the research findings could also be compromised if the researcher reports the suspected child abuse.

Role of the scientist

Is the researcher's role to intervene? The researcher is there as an observant to document and learn about, in this case, parental discipline practices across communities. In famous ethnographies like *Unequal Childhoods* by Annette Lareau and *Dude You're a Fag* by C.J. Pascoe, the ethnographers did not intervene in situations where students and children were at certain levels of risk. At what point does the level of risk cross the line such that the researcher should depart from their traditional role as a scientist?

The researcher has many options, such as:

- Making the report of suspected child abuse to Family Services
- Documenting the situation in the researcher's field notes but not reporting the action
- Deciding that the researcher was not exactly sure what the researcher saw; not including the bruising in the field note or final report and not making a report
- Talking with Ms. Smith about what the researcher observed and reminding her about the limits of informed consent for the future
- Investigating further to see if Lee observes more incidents that look like child abuse and/or talking with Josiah about what happened
- Discussing the situation with the researcher's dissertation committee chair

A retrospective mistake:

The researcher should do a better job from the beginning of ensuring that informed consent is truly informed and is continuous throughout the study. The researcher should explicitly inform

participants about limitations to confidentiality from the outset of the study. The researcher should ensure statements are not made that imply confidentiality beyond what the researcher can offer. The researcher can also periodically revisit consent, the researcher-participant relationship, and limitations to confidentiality with the participants.

A possible resolution:

The researcher is required by law to report suspected child abuse. The researcher should make such a report and let Family Services decide whether to further investigate the situation. The researcher should not do their own investigation into the matter. It would be helpful for the researcher to discuss the situation with their dissertation committee so that the situation can be navigated smoothly. It should be noted that other illegal activities (e.g. bullying in schools, drug dealing, etc.) do not come with mandatory reporting requirements. However, even situations that do not legally require intervention may ethically warrant intervention.

Taking this action will impact a number of key players:

Lee Feld, the graduate student, may end up not being able to include the Smiths in Lee's ethnography. Completing Feld's dissertation may end up delayed another eight months; this could impact funding, job opportunities, family plans, etc.

Laura Smith, the mother, may no longer trust academics or research. Family Services may do nothing, but they may also intervene and she could end up without full custody for her son. Alternatively, perhaps an investigation makes Smith's mother reflective and thoughtful about the extent of her corporal punishment in the future, or includes an intervention that gives Ms. Smith more appropriate disciplinary tools.

Josiah Smith, the son, could end up with no changes to his situation. He could also end up removed from his mother and in foster care.

The general public / broader society could end up not having a full picture of parental discipline in society.

Takeaways:

People who work on this case study are likely to learn that this is an issue that needs to be thought about prior to going into the field and that researchers should have a plan of action, so that 1) trust and consent can be authentic, and 2) the researcher is aware both of their legal duties and what line, when crossed, will lead them to intervene. It can likely get messy when trying to have perspective when already in the field without a plan already in place for the researcher to fall back on. This case study could be expanded on to talk about what that line is, given different scenarios, of when a researcher should intervene or report a situation.