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Incorporating Ethics into RCR Classrooms

Sara Vollmer

University of Alabama, Birmingham

Nancy J. Matchett

University of Northern Colorado

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Office of Research Integrity

NEWSLETTER

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Incorporating Ethics into RCR Courses

Sara Vollmer, Ph.D., University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Nancy J. Matchett, Ph.D., University of Northern Colorado

Philosophy departments have been expanding their offerings in applied ethics and ethical decision making for a number of years, yet relatively little attention has been paid to incorporating ethical thinking in the context of Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) instruction. There has been a sense that the theories of philosophers like Aristotle, Kant, and Mill are too arcane, too complex, and too hard to apply to be of interest to the scientific community. So there has been concern that RCR students will be bored or confused and will gain little practical value.

Today, this situation is changing. A number of ethics instructors are using ethical theories in the context of group discussions, projects, and other assignments that require individuals to think in more principled ways. Rather than presenting the theories as objects of study themselves, the theories are used to inform concrete decision making about daily choices and actions. Aided by the availability of RCR video material, we have been teaching students to evaluate their own choices through the lens of three main ethical frameworks. (See **Incorporating Ethics**, page 5)

A View from Europe on European Research Oversight

Xavier Bosch, Dept. of Internal Medicine, Hospital Clínic, Barcelona

Unlike the United States, research oversight in Europe appears fragmented and varies widely from nation to nation. With the exception of Scandinavia and, to a lesser degree, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), Croatia, and France, there is little or no regulation governing scientific misconduct. Responses to instances of misconduct in Europe have varied greatly from country to country and, to date, the European Commission (EC), the European Union's executive body, has drawn no regulations addressing potential problems arising from its multibillion-dollar framework of research programs.

A 2000 European Science Foundation (ESF) policy paper supported developing transcontinental approaches to monitoring research integrity and misconduct, recommending national academies and research-funding agencies, universities, and research institutions employing scientists and the scientists themselves "to initiate discussions on the most appropriate national approach to procedures for investigating allegations of scientific misconduct" and urging funding agencies to make eligibility for research grants conditional on having adequate policies (See **A View from Europe**, page 7)



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RCR

Incorporating Ethics (from page 1)

While viewing a video case study, students are repeatedly asked how they would respond to the situations. A series of prompts inserted between key scenes encourage students to reflect on the reasons behind each character's choices, as well as on the actions that they themselves might choose if placed in a similar situation. Do they (1) try to produce "the greatest good for the greatest number" of people affected by the situation, viewing themselves as simply one person among many (Mill)? Or do they (2) adhere to one or more duties that apply to the situation, viewing themselves as an individual agent who is obligated to do the right thing regardless of the consequences to self and others (Kant)? Or perhaps they choose to (3) act in ways that exemplify the best or most admirable character traits, traits that are shaped by the communities in which they grew up and currently participate (Aristotle)?

As the video plays out, students learn to recognize subtly different patterns of thought and motivation and develop a deeper awareness of the pattern(s) that govern their own choices and actions. The videos also provide opportunities to practice coordinating individual goals and decisions in a context in which each person's success or failure is inextricably linked to that of a larger group. Since the ethics lessons are brief and presented in the context of ongoing scientific research, students can see the immediate personal relevance, and at the same time, they are being encouraged to think about their own choices from a broader social and ethical perspective.

Improving ethical thinking has obvious implications for the integrity of the research group. We have found that group discussions can help students understand how the benefit of the individual relates to the benefit of the whole group and how this requires conceptualizing the situation in a way that does not place the individual and the group in essential conflict.

In our experience, the process of comparing and contrasting their various beliefs and responses enables students to consider alternate behaviors and learn new solutions to old problems. This heightens their awareness of their own ethical outlooks while also broadening their understanding of the cultures and norms applied by members of other social groups. This leads to discussions on the place of specific rules and values within their research group. When combined with good mentoring practices that exemplify research integrity and affirm the value of students as members of a research community, ethics learning can be fully integrated with scientific training.

That cultivating research integrity requires teaching students how to achieve individual goals in the group context is something RCR educators have known for at least a decade, during which time they have been developing and sharing their cases at sites like www.OnLineEthics.org and www.uab.edu/graduate/rcr (the latter also contains video content). New teaching methods at the inter-

section of RCR and ethical theory now promise to enrich this instruction. The result will be practical lessons in how mentoring and other forms of interpersonal cooperation can help individuals achieve their research goals—while at the same time enhance the research integrity of the scientific communities in which they work.

Research Funding Announcement Specifies Focus

*"Research on Integrity in
Collaborative Research"*

The format for 2010 researchers who are interested in conducting Research on Research Integrity (RRI) will use the R21 mechanism. The R21 directs researchers to focus on questions in the context of research collaborations.

Partnering with ORI this year will be the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR), Fogarty International Center, National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIBIB), and Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). NCRR also will provide administration at all stages of the grant process, including the review process.

Deadline for applications is April 7, 2010. The announcement can be found at <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-RR-09-004.html>