

ethics core TWO MINUTE CHALLENGE: DATA MANAGEMENT

Smoking Gun

I had just become a post doc for a PI who gave me data on 50 subjects to work with. However, the research coordinator, who was resigning, told me that fMRI scans had only been done on 6 of the 50 subjects and that the results did not support the PI's hypotheses. I felt like I had just been handed a smoking gun, and wanted out immediately. What do you do?

By C.K. Gunsalus, based on interview conducted by Joan Sieber.

Issues

Potential data fabrication
Possible incompetence by research coordinator, PI, technician, or both
Potential problems with data keeping
What do you really know?
Do you have other options for work?
Whistleblowing: should you tell?

Rules and Regulations

Federal research integrity regulations
University's regulations

Questions

Had the research coordinator done anything about this situation before resigning? What? With what results?
Does the research coordinator have an axe to grind? Have a reputation for truthfulness? Have anything against you or the PI?
Do you know anyone else on the campus?
Where are the records for the fMRI equipment usage?
Who controls those records? Who owns the equipment? Are there independent records demonstrating which subjects were scanned, and when?
In what form are the data on the 50 subjects? Has anyone else worked on the data?
What is the source of funding for this project?
Is there any possibility that you could retreat to your Ph.D. lab to regroup if this turns out to be a serious problem in the PI's lab?

Takeaway Lessons:

- 1) **Information gathering.** You do not yet know enough to take specific action, and need to gather information about facts, rules and personalities in this situation.
- 2) **Seeking resources.** You may need advice before you take the next step. Are you on close enough terms with your Ph.D. advisor or any member of your committee to seek confidential advice from one person? Does your new campus have an ombudsperson who might be able to provide confidential advice?
- 3) **Asking questions.** Once you have gathered the facts so you have a fuller sense of the situation, you will need to ask the PI questions, based on what you have learned. You should rehearse these questions so you can ask them in a low-key, professional affect, without making charges. Depending on how your fact-finding goes, you may want to have someone else present when you ask these questions.
- 4) **Follow the rules for having a dispute professionally.** Before you have your conversation with the PI, you should read and absorb the [rules for having a dispute professionally](#).

Resources

Campus and federal regulations
Research integrity officer on campus
Mentor
Colleagues
Parents
National ethics center website

Options

Wait and see
Talk to the research integrity officer on your campus
Talk to the PI
Talk to adviser or other trusted mentor
Call the federal funding agency



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National Center for
Professional and
Research Ethics