

Case Study

At a conference you are introduced to Dr. Shannon O’Boyle, a mid-career researcher at the University of Alberta (UA) with uncannily similar interests to your own. Dr. O’Boyle is currently applying for a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The grant will afford her opportunity to consider psychological and public health concerns for the former child soldiers of Joseph Kony. These “liberated” youth are currently living in an orphanage run by a Christian non-governmental organization (NGO). After a dynamic and engaging 3-hour dinner at the conference, she asks whether you would be willing to become involved in the SSHRC proposal as a co-investigator. You agree. Over the next six months you collaborate toward a SSHRC proposal. In the process, you discover that Dr. O’Boyle is terribly overcommitted and unable to devote much time to the proposal. However, as PI she insists on taking the methodological lead. A qualitative researcher, she specifies a sample $N = 5$ liberated youth for extensive interviews. Although you have serious concerns about sample size, you defer to her judgment. You feel a little better about the situation following successful appeal for a supplementary survey protocol which will use a sample $N = 55$ liberated youth. Six months later, somewhat to your surprise, you receive the award letter from SSHRC for \$120,000 CDN.

Shortly after this notification, Dr. O’Boyle goes AWOL for extended periods of time. She does not respond to email or voice mail during these month-long periods. Although the problem seems to be health related, she is vague when asked. Being a responsible collaborator, you work to obtain IRB approval at the two (engaged) institutions. The UA reviewers have two major concerns with your project. First, they argue the $N = 5$ sample is non-generalizable. Because the study assumes an unusually high degree of risk (orphaned children with severe trauma histories), the IRB perceives the lack of generalizability to be a potential roadblock—risk isn’t sufficiently offset by benefit. Second, they insist on local (i.e., Government of Uganda) IRB review and approval of the project. In exploring the last issue with a colleague familiar with the Ugandan context, you learn the responsible government ministry is corrupt to the extent that you will have to bribe a key official in order to obtain the requested local approval.

Process Questions for Groups

1. How will you respond to the IRB concern regarding non-generalizability? How will you finesse this issue relative to your PI and grant funding agency?
2. In this situation it seems unethical behavior is required in order for you to fulfill your compliance obligations back home. How will you manage this problem?
3. Based on personal moral convictions, what are your priorities for the current situation? What are potential implications of NOT doing the research with the former child soldiers of Kony?