

Human Subjects Case Study Reaction Paper

In this case study, Ann wants to use deception to examine the reaction of participants to an apparent medical emergency occurring in a neighboring room, where it sounds to the participant as if someone has been seriously injured and is crying loudly for help. The others in the room with the participant—Ann's confederates—essentially ignore the cry for help and return to the task they have been assigned to. As a result, the participant is faced with deciding between breaking with the group's behavior and helping the apparent injured person, or conforming and continuing with the task.

As it is presented, Ann's proposed study has clear ethical issues and should not pass IRB / human subjects review. Having to make this decision could cause an unacceptable amount of emotional harm and stress to participants, even after they have been debriefed at the end of the experiment. As in Stanley Milgram's famous studies of obedience, this emotional harm is unnecessary and the potential risks of long-term emotional stress for participants are not reasonable; they are much higher than the supposed benefits to participants and to the field of psychology. It is also possible that participants may feel coerced into a certain reaction by the confederates, which violates the "respect for persons" principle of the Belmont Report.

While Ann has tried to resolve these issues through the use of debriefing, that is not sufficient for responsible and ethical research. I would instead suggest that Ann use a less stressful and emotional intervention, such as helping clean up a spill. Studying group conformity and altruistic behavior in a setting with a much lower risk of potential emotional harm would greatly reduce the ethical problems with Ann's proposed study and increase her chances of gaining approval from the IRB.