



»Case Studies«

Case Study 1: When Collaborators Disagree

Case Study 2: Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

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Investigators in various social and behavioral sciences and in public health have been collaborating for about a year on an interdisciplinary project, across several institutions, to understand the causes of terrorism and to determine ways to prevent it. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has funded the research.

While all the investigators have been excited about working together on such an important topic, a few issues and problems with regard to the interdisciplinary collaboration are beginning to emerge.

One researcher, for example, had an opportunity to visit a foreign country and interview young people in a terrorist training camp using a tool developed by the investigators. He also decided to hire a local health worker to draw blood from the subjects to compare hormone levels with age-matched controls in the United States. Before he went away, though, he had not considered asking the young people for their consent to participate in the research project, since in his prior research he had relied on anonymous databases from which he extracted data and he had not had experience in getting consent.

After he returned home, other difficulties arose. When he discussed his findings with the five co-principal investigators at his institution, half of them thought that the research should be immediately published, while the others thought that the results should be given to the government in confidence, because of the timeliness and nature of what was found. But, even within the group of people wanting to publish, disputes arose concerning which journal the data should be sent to, with each person arguing for his or her own discipline's peer-reviewed publication. Moreover, when a key collaborator at another institution heard about the findings indirectly, he felt slighted and angry that he hadn't been asked to take part in the discussions.

Another issue creating controversy in the collaboration is who should be considered an author on a paper dealing with less controversial data. While some of the disciplines, such as political science, tend not to have more than one author on a paper, public-health research tends to include more people on a paper. Since the grant is expected to last another two years, the researchers are now grappling with ways to smooth out the problems.