

Case study 8. The broken promise

A hypothetical case about exploitation of or coercion against subordinates

Ginny, a first-year undergraduate student, signed up to participate in an experiment conducted by a researcher in the Department. It was said in the recruitment flyer that every participant would receive a \$50 supermarket voucher as remuneration for participation in each of the four sessions of the experiment. After Ginny completed the first session, the researcher's assistant told her that participants would be given vouchers worth \$200 in one go after they completed all sessions for the sake of administrative convenience. Ginny returned the next week to complete the rest of the sessions; in the last one, however, she left midway because she felt sick. Two weeks later, when Ginny asked about her remuneration, the assistant told her that she would not get the vouchers as she did not finish the whole experiment. Ginny felt being cheated and angry. Her friends urged her to report the case to the Department Head. Worried about retaliation, Ginny did not report it but just blamed her bad luck.

Reflection corner

1. What should Ginny do in this situation?
2. Is this a case of exploitation?
3. How can Ginny protect herself from being exploited?

Analysis: How to avoid exploitation?

In research that involves human subjects, researchers should always ensure that the participants are fairly compensated in terms of both expenses and remuneration. As promulgated by the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), some research participants are vulnerable to exploitation and should be dealt with extra care. They could be subordinates such as students doing course work with the researcher, patients recruited in healthcare settings, children, and other disadvantaged groups. Researchers should minimise the influence of multiple relationships and respect individuals' right of declining participation. When research participants believe they are exploited in any form, or when they found a researcher inappropriately hint at certain adverse consequences (real or perceived) in an attempt to induce participation, they should report the incident to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) and/or the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for evaluation and other necessary action.

See more:

1. Ethical Principles and Standards for Developmental Scientists, SRCD:
<https://www.srkd.org/about-us/ethical-principles-and-standards-developmental-scientists>
2. Summary of the Belmont Report:
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/HREC/BelmontReport.rtf>