Exercise: Two-statement icebreaker

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Introduction I originally developed this exercise when I was invited to give a guest lecture in an undergraduate research seminar in psychology. It proved to be a quick and easy way to get the students involved and talking.

The exercise

1. Ask students to write a short phrase to fill in the blank in these two statements:

    a. In research in psychology, _____ is ethical.

    b. In research in psychology, _____ is **un**ethical.

2. Ask them to mark one of the two phrases. Don't give any criteria for making the choice.

3. Ask each one to read her or his marked phrase without saying whether it was (a) or (b). Write the phrases on the board.

4. For each phrase, ask the students whether they think it is ethical or unethical. Optionally, allow them to answer "undecided" or "abstain." Tally the responses.

5. Discuss the results.

Comments

When I first used this exercise, we noticed that the items which we generally agreed were ethical were also quite broad and vague, including "animal experimentation" and "brain research." I suggested that we could all imagine instances of brain research that we would find unethical, and no one disagreed.

We also noticed that many of the statements which we generally agreed were unethical posed real temptations to researchers.

The statement with the lowest degree of consensus ("experiment on children with their consent and the consent of their parent or guardian, but without a full explanation of the research"), disagreement turned on interpretations of the word "explanation." We all agreed that failing to explain some things (like potential risks) would make the research unethical, but failing to explain some other things (like the subtle implications of the working hypothesis) probably wouldn't.