IRB Synopsis of Proposal

Evaluation and Learning Biases with Instructors who Smoke or Drink

1. The sources of participants will be undergraduate psychology courses. We expect approximately 100 male and 100 female participants, who are between the ages of 18 and 30 years and who represent a variety of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The only criterion for exclusion from participation is that students must be at least 18 years of age.
2. To recruit participants from the undergraduate psychology courses, at an appropriate time during class, Dr. Crystal Oberle will read the information on the consent form. She will then pass around a sign-up sheet, on which the students may volunteer for a particular time slot. When the participants arrive for this study, they will be given a consent form to sign, and a separate consent form that they may keep for their records.
3. Participation will include the following steps. First, participants will watch and listen to a 30-minute lecture on the topic of sleep disorders. Second, participants will complete a survey with 10 questions asking them to rate various aspects of the lecture; 20 multiple choice questions assessing the information that they retained from the lecture; and 10 questions asking for their demographic information (such as their age, sex, and ethnicity) and their prior knowledge about sleep disorders. Participation in this study will take approximately one hour of the participant’s time.

As to the research manipulations, participants may sign up for only one of six lectures. Three of the lectures will be given by a woman, and the other three will be given by a man. For the female lecturer, her clothes will smell like cigarette smoke for the first lecture, her clothes will smell like alcohol for the second lecture, and her clothes will neither smell like smoke nor smell like alcohol for the third lecture. Likewise, for the male lecturer, his clothes will smell like smoke for the first lecture, his clothes will smell like alcohol for the second lecture, and his clothes will neither smell like smoke nor smell like alcohol for the third lecture. To make the clothes smell like smoke, before the lecture, the lecturer will find a secluded spot on campus where smoking is allowed, and he/she will light a cigarette and waft the smoke onto his/her clothes. To make the lecturer smell like alcohol, before the lecture and prior to arriving on campus, the lecturer will use a standard squirt bottle to lightly spray a mist of beer onto his/her clothes. Then, in all conditions, the lecturer will stand by the door to the room in which the lecture will be held, and will hand out consent forms to participants as they arrive to and enter the room. This method will maximize the likelihood that participants perceive the given smells, or lack thereof, and start making their impressions about the lecturer before the lecture begins. As knowledge of these manipulations will likely alter the participants’ behavior, the true purpose of the study will be withheld and not disclosed until debriefing.

1. Potential risks may include a very mild and temporary feeling of anxiety associated with participation in any study, potential discomfort from being next to someone who smells, and potential violation of trust upon learning that the true purpose of the study was withheld prior to participating. Regarding the second potential risk, as an instructor, I frequently encounter students whose clothes and skin smell of stale cigarette smoke, and on occasion, I unfortunately encounter students who smell like alcohol. Thus, these smells are normal and likely experienced on perhaps a daily basis by all participants. Further, exposure to the smells will be brief, with participants being close to the lecturer only upon entering the room. Plus, at no time will participants be exposed to actual cigarette smoke, nor will they be given any alcohol. Regarding the third potential risk, IF I tell the student participants that they will hear a lecture by either a lecturer who smells like normal, a lecturer who smells like smoke, or a lecturer who smells like alcohol; then I am telling the participants that this is a manipulation, and the participants are less likely to believe that the lecturer actually smokes or drank alcohol before giving the lecture. If they do not believe that the person smokes, then there is no reason to feel prejudiced against them for smoking. In other words, the data for the study will be completely meaningless. This is the reason for my need to withhold the true purpose of the study. Please note, however, that I never actively lie to the participants, in that I never tell them that there is a different purpose. Nevertheless, I do realize that withholding the true purpose of the study is a form of passive deception and that the potential risks of such passive deception must be outweighed by significant benefits, which are described in point #6 below.
2. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each participant’s name will appear only on the consent form, which will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Crystal Oberle’s office. The data from the surveys will be kept in a different locked filing cabinet – separate from consent forms – in Dr. Oberle’s office. After five years, all materials will be destroyed with a paper shredder. Although the results of this study may be published, the participants’ names will not be used, and the participants will not be identified in any way.
3. Participation in this study will give participants experience with important research in educational and social psychology, which will benefit instructors and their students, as well as shed more light on our prejudicial biases (whether explicit or implicit) and their impact on learning. Past research shows that, on instructor evaluation forms, students give lower ratings to instructors in minority groups (e.g., Crandall & Cohen, 1994; Ewing et at., 2003; Russ et al., 2002), reflecting prejudicial biases. Given that students report learning less from instructors who they deem as not credible (Beatty, Behnke, & Henderson, 1980; Teven & McCroskey, 1997), then these prejudicial biases may result in students learning less in a course. However, research has not yet assessed the impact of such prejudices on actual learning. Regarding the implications, if we find that students provide lower evaluation ratings to the lecturers who smell like smoke and if the students learn less from those lecturers, for instance, then instructors who smoke may adjust their behavior. Those instructors may either try to hide their smoking, or more optimistically, upon discovering these negative effects, those instructors may be provided with an additional incentive to quit smoking. The students, then, may think more highly of the instructor than they otherwise would have. In turn, they may learn more, and they may provide the instructor with higher evaluation ratings that impact merit raises, tenure, and promotion. Beyond these benefits, this research is providing four undergraduate research assistances (identified on the consent form) with valuable research experience that will be rewarding and may also help them achieve admission into graduate school. Finally, we hope to publish the findings of this research in a reputable peer-reviewed journal, and this productivity, combined with the aforementioned benefits, will be favorable for the university. In summary, the potential benefits of this research are as follows: stimulating thinking about prejudicial biases in our society; greater student learning, greater instructor evaluation ratings and resulting raises and promotions, and better health for instructors if the instructors change their behavior based on the results of the study; valuable experience for research assistants who will benefit into graduate school; and university recognition.
4. With approval of the student’s instructor, participants may receive extra credit points for participating. The exact amount of extra credit will be left to the instructor’s discretion. If the instructor does offer extra credit but the student does not wish to participate, then he or she may earn the same number of points by writing a summary of an assigned article related to the effectiveness of guest lectures. Reading and summarizing this article will take approximately one hour to complete, comparable to participation in the study.
5. The anticipated benefits to the participants and society outweigh any possible risks of participation, given that the only risks are minor (slight anxiety from participating in any study, potential discomfort from being next to someone who smells, and potential violation of trust upon learning that the true purpose of the study was withheld prior to participating), whereas the benefits are major (stimulating thinking about prejudicial biases in our society; greater student learning, greater instructor evaluation ratings and resulting raises and promotions, and better health for instructors if the instructors change their behavior based on the results of the study; valuable experience for research assistants who will benefit into graduate school; university recognition; extra credit for student participants).
6. No outside sites or agencies will be used.
7. This study is a faculty research project of Dr. Crystal Oberle.
8. This study is not part of a thesis, dissertation, or other student project.
9. This study has not been reviewed by another IRB.
10. In addition to Dr. Crystal Oberle, the following undergraduate research assistants will have access to the data during the course of the study: Stephanie Engeling (se1081@txstate.edu), Adam Hassan (ah1432@txstate.edu), Chris Lee (cl1200@txstate.edu), and Senecae Ontiberos (so1031@txstate.edu). Regarding this latter access, these undergraduate research assistants will enter the data from the test/survey forms (which again do not contain the participants’ names or other identification) into SPSS, so that summary descriptive and inferential analyses may be conducted. After entering the data for a given participant, that participant’s test/survey forms will be returned to Dr. Crystal Oberle. After completion of the study, only Dr. Crystal Oberle will have access to the data.