

Ethical guidelines: lessons learned from little albert



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Psychologists today must follow strict guidelines when it comes to conducting psychological experiments. Many experiments in the past haven't always followed these guidelines and have raised some ethical issues.

The guidelines were put in place to protect participants and their rights. It has to be stated that not all participants, for example children, the disabled, elderly or hearing impaired are capable of making informed decisions and should not be included in the experiment and wherever possible special care must be taken with vulnerable persons. ALL participants should be completely informed and armed with as much information as possible about the study so that they can make an informed decision about being involved. They must not be deceived in any way. Any participation must be voluntary and confidentiality and anonymity must be observed and all involved have the right to withdraw at any time, even if that means at the end of the study if they are not happy with anything and any study must not cause harm or possible harm in any way.

There have been many studies in the past that have certainly crossed these boundaries and raised many ethical questions for example The Little Albert experiment. In this experiment John B Watson and Rosalie Raynor wanted to test out the theory that emotional reactions could be classically conditioned in humans. Their study was based on a previous experiment conducted on dogs by Russian Ivan Pavlov. Albert was aged around 9 months of age and exposed to a range of stimuli including a dog, rabbit, monkey, masks, burning paper and a white rat. Initially Albert showed no real fear of these objects appearing to show the most interest in the white rat. The next time Albert was shown the white rat a metal pipe behind him was hit with a

hammer creating a large noise and making Albert's natural reaction to cry. After several times of being given the rat and the hammer being hit on the pole, Albert connected the rat to loud noise and began crying upon just seeing the rat.

Watson and Raynor wrote:

" The instant the rat was shown, the baby began to cry. Almost instantly he turned sharply to the left, fell over on [his] left side, raised himself on all fours and began to crawl away so rapidly that he was caught with difficulty before reaching the edge of the table.

(www. verywell. com/thelittlealbertexperiment)

Watson and Raynor had noticed that as well as being conditioned to the rat, there was also a generalization conditioning that had occurred, meaning Albert had developed a fear of a wide variety of similar furry objects including a fur coat and a Santa Claus mask worn by Watson himself.

Although this study is well known and often included in introductory psychology classes it raises many ethical questions as there was no apparent design or construction, relying only on their own subjective interpretations to calculate Albert's reactions. There have been theories that Albert may not have been completely healthy as was stated in the experiment but he had a condition called hydrocephalus (water on the brain) which is an abnormal accumulation of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) and could have had an impact on the long term effects on Albert and the results of the study conducted.

Watson and Raynor were unable to attempt to eliminate the conditioned fear

as his Mother moved away obviously talking Albert away from the study, which again is against ethical guidelines as we do not know the long term damage it may have caused, although there is a suggestion that little Albert may have died aged just 6 due to the hydrocephalus.

Another study that crosses ethical boundaries is the Landis Facial Expressions Experiment. A study conducted in 1924 by Carney Landis, a psychology graduate student from the University of Minnesota. His idea was to see if emotions evoke characteristic facial expressions. He mostly included fellow graduate students so his collected data was not going to be entirely accurate as he only had one age group to focus his results on. He would have gotten varied results had he used a test group with more varied age ranges.

He painted black lines on the participants faces so it was easier to see the muscle movement on their face. He then exposed them to various items to see how each person reacted. The items were chosen to provoke a strong reaction and each participant was photographed. They were asked to smell ammonia, shown pornographic material and asked to put their hands in a bucket full of frogs, however the climax to the experiment was when Landis brought out a live rat and asked everyone to decapitate it. Initially they all refused but eventually approximately 2/3 of participants did it.

Landis noted:

" The effort and attempt to hurry usually resulted in rather awkward and prolonged job of decapitation " (www. madsciencemuseum. com)

Eventually Landis took the knife and did it himself. He discovered the study displayed a willingness of participants to obey commands no matter how bizarre the commands seemed to be, however Landis never realized the compliance of his test subjects was far more interesting than facial expressions. He still remained committed to his initial focus topic and was never able to completely match emotions and expressions as people use an extremely wide variety of expressions to convey the same emotion - such as disgust at having to decapitate a rat. There is no actual universal expression for emotions.

In both studies we can see that obviously ethical boundaries have been crossed. In the Little Albert experiment the structure of the study could have been better organized rather than just relying on their observations alone. They also MAY have caused harm by not using a 'healthy' baby as stated or by reconditioning Albert not to fear these objects. In the Landis facial experiment not all information was made available to participants as they were not informed about having to decapitate a rat. Both of these studies would not be allowed today unless significant changes to the way they were conducted are made

References

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