

Little albert and david reimer: ethical analysis



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Ethics Essay

Introduction

All psychological studies focusing on human being needs to obtain ethical approval by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Psychologist wishing to conduct a research/study must first submit a filled in form of psychology ethics committee application cover page, write up a detail proposal describing the research process and attach any supporting documents. These steps are compulsory prior to research in order to protect participants from inhumane harm.

Due to past examples of highly unethical research like the “ Little Albert” experiment and “ David Reimer” experiment, it has triggered psychological societies to issue a code of ethics in psychology which provides ethical guidelines for researchers. The code of ethics includes informed consent, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, accurate reporting, do no harm, debriefing and desensitisation.

Experiment 1-Unethical Reasons

The first example of past research that would be considered unethical by today’s guidelines is the “ Little Albert” experiment. The experiment is conducted in 1920 at John’s Hopkins University by behavioural psychologist John B. Watson and his assistant. The purpose of the experiment was to investigate whether fear is something born with or can be learned due to exposure of environmental influences; and if phobia can be developed by classical conditioning. The participant was 9 month old infant, Little Albert. In

the experiment, Little Albert was first exposed to various white or furry objects and happenings that usually cause fear. Next, a white lab rat was given to Albert and he showed no fear. Watson then made loud banging sounds behind Albert's back every time he touched the rat - Little Albert cried. He became upset when he was exposed to the white rat again as he linked the rat with the banging noise produced.

First of all, the experiment has breached the "do no harm" guideline as Little Albert was not protected from psychological harm - the main purpose of the experiment is to test if fear can be developed by classical conditioning. Also, Watson knew that there will be not be sufficient time left to treat any possible fears/harms caused. Secondly, the "voluntary participation" guideline is breached as Little Albert did not volunteer for the study, he is too young. Little Albert was chosen from the hospital where his mother worked as a wet nurse. She is financially dependent on the hospital for income and feared that she would lose her job if she disagreed Little Albert's participation. In addition, she received \$1 for Little Albert's participation in the experiment. In a way, she was forced to agree for participation in order to keep her job and due to aid in financial struggles. Thirdly, the "informed consent" guideline is breached as his mother was never informed about the procedure, the pros & cons and withdrawal rights of the experiment. Lastly, the "desensitisation and debriefing" guideline is breached as there was no removal of ill effects and Little Albert was never treated for his fears as he left the hospital right after the experiment ended. As a result, Little Albert developed fears towards anything that was white & fluffy and grown up having a phobia of dogs.

Improvements

There are guidelines to ensure that the “ Little Albert” experiment could be run ethically. Firstly, the do no harm and desensitisation guideline could be linked together. Watson should have suggested treatment plans to help remove the harm and cause of fear of Little Albert. This is extremely crucial in protecting the participants from future psychological problems that may have a significant impact on their lives. Secondly, Watson should have chosen other babies who didn't have parents who worked in that hospital, so that they do not feel pressured to accept the request. Also, Watson should not use money to gain agreement for participation. Lastly, Watson should have properly inform Little Albert's mom about the experiment procedure and make it clear that he had the right to withdraw from the experiment at any time without any problems caused.

Experiment 2- Unethical

The second example of past research that would be considered unethical by today's guidelines is the “ David Reimer” experiment. The experiment is conducted in 1965 at John's Hopkins Hospital by sexologist Dr Money. The purpose of the experiment was to prove that nurture, instead of nature determines gender identity and sexual orientation. The participant was 22 month old baby, David Reimer. In the experiment, the baby underwent a sex re-assignment surgery where his testes were surgically removed. David (now Brenda) changed his name and was brought up as a female. The plan failed when his family finally revealed her original gender at age 15.

First of all, the experiment has breached the “do no harm” guideline as David Reimer experienced severe psychological harm – he committed suicide at age 38. Also, the experiment has indirectly caused harm to his family: his mom was suicidal, his dad was alcoholic and his twin brother was severely depressed committed suicide at the end. Secondly, the “voluntary participation” guideline is breached as David Reimer did not volunteer for the study, his parents were equally horrified by the suggestion of a sex change, but eventually agreed to the procedure. Little did they know Dr Money’s real intention – to use David to prove his “theory of gender neutrality”, which states that gender can be trained by being brought up in an appropriate environment. Thirdly, the “informed consent” guideline is breached as his parents were not properly informed of the experiment. They were not told what was going on during the kids’ yearly meetings with Dr Money. Fourthly, the “accurate reporting” guideline is breached. Dr Money wrote a report on his study and claimed that the experiment was a huge success and that his theory is supported, which greatly contradicts the data from previous reports. It is clear that the Reimer family were having huge psychological issues – David wasn’t living up to his role as Dr Money had described in his report. Dr Money has falsified the outcome of the experiment. Lastly, the “withdrawal rights” is breached as David and his twin brother Brian were forced to travel to Baltimore for yearly meetings with Dr Money until they refused (not because they had the right to withdraw, but because they were too frightened to see him)

Improvements

There are guidelines to ensure that the “ David Reimer” experiment could be run ethically. Firstly, Dr Money should have suggested a psychiatrist to evaluate David and provide counselling treatment to aid in his acceptance of his true gender. Dr Money should have suggested treatment centres for the Reimer family to visit to remove all negative effects caused by the hidden truth of David’s real gender. Secondly, Dr Money should have debrief the Reimer family of his real intentions of using David as an experimental object is due to selfishness, instead of persuading them to believe that a sex change is indeed the best advice that Dr Money can give. Thirdly, Dr Money should have informed David’s parents of what he did during the yearly meetings. In those meetings, he frightened the twins by using disgusting and inappropriate ways to make a clear cut difference between feminine and masculine. He made David and his twin perform sexual acts and took photos of them naked. Lastly, Dr Money should have accurately report his experiment results. Many textbooks were re-written just to publish his theory that he stated as supported, which in reality just clearly contradicts the whole experiment result when David committed suicide due to depression.

Conclusion

All in all, when there weren’t any ethical guidelines in the past, unethical experiments can be conducted by psychologists for selfish and illegitimate reasons. It is due to such unethical experiments that urged psychological societies to issue a code of ethics in order to protect the participants from inhumane harm. All psychologist have to strictly follow the guidelines in order to obtain approval to conduct their intended experiment.

Due to the lack of guidelines in the past, Little Albert was psychologically harmed that he developed a phobia which was not treated. David Reimer was also psychologically harmed as he was not informed of his original gender until 15 years later where his whole family broke down psychologically. Previously, “she” was so confused and was often teased about her questionable gender identity, which also impacted on her self-esteem.

In reality, both experiments could be run ethically even if a code of ethics was not issued in the early days. However, this is dependent on the degree of common sense and humaneness the psychologist designs the experiment.

Referencing

- Introduces the reader to the fact that psychological research today must follow ethical guidelines. Briefly states what these guidelines are. Explains that there are examples of past research that would breach today's guidelines.
- Describes an example of past research that would be considered unethical by today's guidelines. Explains why it would be classed as unethical i. e. which guidelines are breached and how.
- Makes specific suggestions as to how the research could be run ethically. If this is not possible, then argues why not.
- Describes a second example of past research that would be considered unethical by today's guidelines.. Explains why it would be classed as unethical i. e. which guidelines are breached and how.

- Makes specific suggestions as to how the second example of research could be run ethically. If this is not possible, then argues why not.
- Sums up main points of the essay (does not introduce any new information or ideas).
- Harvard in-text referencing and a full reference list is essential