

A Review and Comparison of Psychological Experiments that Question the Ethics of Science

T. Russell Bowles, '23

Introduction

Ethical decisions are essential in all things people engage in. Ethics are personal, meaning that one person's idea of what is ethical may not fall in line with another person's. With that being said, most ideologies involving ethics contain viewpoints that many people can agree on. Ethics also depend on culture. This dependence is a result of certain cultures having different upbringings, religions, and other beliefs that affect what a culture views as ethical. Also, ethics evolve with time; what was accepted as ethical in the past might not be seen as ethical in the present, and what is viewed as ethical now may not be viewed as ethical in the future. This idea is important to remember when thinking about or reviewing experiments that have been carried out in the past. When looking at psychological experiments such as the Stanford Prison Experiment and Operation Midnight Climax, it can be seen that there were actions in these experiments that are unacceptable and unethical. Such experiments are a prime example of unethical circumstances that have been imposed on people in order to learn more about how the human brain works. The focus of this article is to show that these experiments are unethical while also addressing the fact that the information gathered from them can still be used for the advancement of science. In other words, the history and information gathered from these experiments should be remembered and interpreted, but these experiments should never be repeated.

The Stanford Prison Experiment

In August of 1971, the Stanford Prison experiment took place and was led by a psychology professor named Philip G. Zimbardo. Zimbardo acquired student volunteers from Stanford University via a local newspaper ad. Students who decided to participate in the experiment were randomly assigned a role as a prisoner or a guard (*The Stanford Prison Experiment: 40 years later*). The randomly assigned prisoners "were treated like every other criminal, being arrested at their own homes, without warning, and taken to the local police station" (Mcleod, S.). The process of arrest and being booked into a prison is nearly identical to how actual prisoners are put into jail. Prisoners were then forced to remove all clothing and were given a prison uniform. Each uniform had a number on it and each prisoner was addressed by that number. The guards were also given uniforms which consisted of khaki colored shirts, pants, a whistle, and a pair of sunglasses (Mcleod, S.). When first looking at this experiment, it looks as if it is a simple roleplay performance such as a play or movie, but that is not

the case. The experiment was supposed to last one to two weeks but ended after just six days (*The Stanford Prison Experiment: 40 years later*). The premature end to this experiment can be blamed on the treatment of the prisoners by the guards. In the beginning hours of the experiment, the guards began to torment the prisoners. The prisoners were woken up in the middle of the night, given physical punishments such as pushups, and also had cruel acts performed on them by the guards (Mcleod, S.). The effects of the abuse on the prisoners' mental health quickly began to show. In one instance, an inmate began to suffer from "acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage" (Mcleod, S.). The inmate discussed his issues with the guards but was ultimately told he was "weak" (Mcleod, S.). Later, the inmate's issues became so strong that he was then let out of the experiment by the psychologists. In another instance, an inmate was left in tears after a conversation with a catholic priest. That inmate was later permitted to leave the experiment. When learning about what these college students went through, it is important to think about the lack of ethical thinking behind this experiment.

Review of the Ethics of The Stanford Prison Experiment

When looking at the Stanford Prison Experiment, many unethical processes and events can be seen. For example, the people participating in the experiment were not fully informed of what would take place during the experiment. For instance, when the prisoners were taken and arrested from their homes, this was not explained to them prior to the start of the experiment (Mcleod, S.). The prisoners were also harassed, verbally abused, and physically abused. There should have been more restrictions put on the guards in order to ensure the psychological wellbeing of prisoners. Although there are a lot of unethical aspects of this experiment, it should be understood that a lot can be learned from the experiment. This experiment provided an example of how the human brain reacts in captive situations. This experiment can be used in order to make prisons more humane. For example, prisons now give guards proper training and rules to follow in order to keep a humane environment inside the prison. The Navy has also taken advantage of the information obtained from the Stanford prison experiment. The United States Navy has used this information to train soldiers how to compose themselves if taken captive (Mcleod, S.). The Stanford Prison Experiment is a prime example of how important ethics is in the science community. Although

the experiment was very unethical, the information gathered from it is valuable and should not be discarded.

Operation Midnight Climax

Lysergic acid diethylamide is a hallucinogenic drug commonly known as LSD. In the early 1950's, the Central Intelligence Agency began Operation Midnight Climax (O'Carroll, S.). For nearly a decade, the CIA used women to seduce and drug men with the hallucinogen LSD. This operation was led by Sidney Gottlieb and took place during the cold war as a copycat experiment taken from Russia (O'Carroll, S.). Operation Midnight Climax started with a man named George White designing a room where the experiments would take place. The room was decorated using sexual pictures and paintings on the walls along with flowers and red decorations (A&E Television Networks). Many of the decorations used in this set up were known to "evoke sex and glamour" (A&E Television Networks). The room was also equipped with a two-way mirror that allowed CIA officials to watch the events while drinking martinis (A&E Television Networks). The CIA paid prostitutes to seduce men and lure them into this room. When the time was right, the prostitutes would secretly spike the man's drink with LSD. After the LSD was ingested, agents would watch the men's behavior from behind the two-way mirror. The agents often consumed alcohol while using the experiment for entertainment (A&E Television Networks).

Review of the Ethics of Operation Midnight Climax

When reading about Operation Midnight Climax, many unethical aspects of these experiments can be seen. For starters, prostitutes were the main way of getting the unsuspecting men into the staged rooms. The CIA used and encouraged an illegal practice in order to conduct their experiments. The prostitutes were even rewarded and given future pardons to crimes if they agreed to participate in the experiment. This means that rules and laws were twisted to fit the CIA's agenda, which is a direct violation of the rule of law. Then, the men were unknowingly and unwillingly drugged. What makes it worse is the fact that LSD was a fairly new drug at the time of this experiment. This is important to think about because the effects of LSD were not fully known and the drug could have affected people in many different ways. The men in these experiments were used as if they were test dummies and were exposed to a drug that the government did not know much about. An important aspect of ethics is what people do when they know they are not being watched. For example, the

CIA agents were using this experiment as a social and entertainment scene. This is a tell tale sign of bad ethics because these agents knew that they were exposing these men to a drug that could have dangerous effects. Even though they were aware of the danger, the agents acted as if they were watching a movie and having drinks with friends. This inappropriate and unethical behavior in this small part of the experiment shows the unethicity of the experiment as a whole. In this type of experiment where a person is given a substance that is being tested, there should be little to no risk to the person and the person should know that they are a part of an experiment. In Operation Midnight Climax, that was clearly not the case. With that being said, there is still some valuable information that can be found in this experiment. Some information about how LSD affects the human brain was discovered during this experiment, but unfortunately most of the files from this case were destroyed by the overseers (A&E Television Networks).

Conclusion: Data from Unethical Experiments

These two experiments both have at least one thing in common: they were both unethical. Experiments like these raise an important question: given that these experiments were unethical, is it unethical to use the experiments' data to gain knowledge about relatable aspects of science? The answer is yes, and here's why: if the data gathered from a past unethical experiment is useful to the betterment of science, there is no reason not to use that data. One could argue that it glorifies the people that were in charge and orchestrated the experiments, but that would not be true. Utilizing this data spreads awareness and provides the victims of these gruesome experiments some form of justice, perhaps a feeling that their sacrifice and mistreatment was ultimately used for good. As for the experiments themselves, these actions toward innocent people should never be repeated. The people that fell victim to the overseers of these types of operations and experiments deserve full compensation and restitution.

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