

Examining the Ethical Violations of the Monster Study

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Abstract

The “Monster Study”, conducted in 1939 by Wendell Johnson and Mary Tudor at the University of Iowa is notorious for its significant ethical violations. Johnson was born with a stutter which is what led him and Tudor to study the impact of positive and negative speech therapy on children. However, with this came various ethical violations such as lack of informed consent, psychological harm inflicted on vulnerable children, unfair discrimination, deception, failure to debrief, and poor responsibility on the researchers to uphold ethical responsibility. The children that participated in the study suffered from multiple long-term developmental and social consequences such as anxiety, speech impairments, insecurity, social avoidance, and poor academic performance. This case study highlights the importance of ethical standards in psychological research and proves how lack of ethical standards can lead to life-long implications for participants.

Key words: ethics in psychology, speech pathology, speech therapy

Ethical Violations of the Monster Study

The “Monster Study” was conducted in 1939 by Wendell Johnson and Mary Tudor at the University of Iowa. This study is well known for its various ethical violations and long-term impact on the children who participated in the study. Johnson and Tudor had intentions of exploring the impact of positive and negative speech therapy in children. Heath (n.d.) mentions that Johnson was born with a stutter and spent his life studying clinical psychology and speech pathology which led to continuing research studies in speech therapy. However, the study turned awry due to the lack of ethical standards throughout the duration of the study. A key point to note is that the American Psychological Association’s Ethics Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2003) was not created until 1953. Although there were no formal ethical guidelines established during the time of the study, Johnson and Tudor’s disregard for basic ethical principles such as informed consent raise concerns about the ethics of psychological research in general. This study not only brings to light the lack of ethical practices in the past but raises awareness of the ethical standards psychologists are expected to uphold in the twenty-first century according to the American Psychological Association’s Code of Conduct (2017).

Wendell Johnson was born with a stutter which prompted him to study whether or not stuttering can be induced through different types of speech therapy. Mary Tudor was a graduate student under Johnson at the University of Iowa and played a role in conducting the experiment. Tudor was responsible for conducting therapy sessions for the children who participated in the study. She delivered positive and negative feedback to the children, which was necessary to the methodology for the experiment. Goldfarb (2006) explains that twenty two orphaned children participated in the study. It was reported by teachers that some of the orphans had a stutter before the study began while others did not (Goldfarb, 2006). They were separated into two groups labeled “normal speakers” and “stutters” where Johnson and his team would meet with each

child over a period of five months to evaluate their speech (Practical Psychology, 2019). Only one group received positive speech therapy which was the “normal speakers” while the other, the stutters, received negative speech therapy. The positive group received encouragement and affirmation during their therapy sessions meanwhile the negative group received harsh criticism and were belittled during their sessions. The point of this study was to prove Johnson’s hypothesis which was the diagnosogenic theory which Ambrose (2004, p. 82) states “that stuttering begins in the ears of the parents when they overreact to their child’s normal disfluencies.” A child will naturally have normal hesitations or repetitions, however it is only when parents give them negative feedback that they learn to stutter (Bloodstein, et al, 2021) The results of this study found the children in the “normal speakers” group were not affected by anything psychologists told them, as we wouldn’t expect them to because they were receiving positive reinforcement. It was noted that only one child saw improvement (Practical Psychology, 2021). However, the children in the stutters group showed worse results with five children who did not have a stuffer previously who developed a stutter by the end of the study (Practical Psychology, 2019).

Ethical Implications

Informed Consent

According to the American Psychological Association’s Code of Ethics (2017), there are various ethical principles in question in relation to this study. Five key violations are lack of informed consent, psychological harm inflicted on vulnerable children, potential unfair discrimination, deception, failure to debrief, and poor responsibility on the researchers to uphold ethical responsibility. Regarding informed consent, the children that the study was conducted on did not give Johnson or Tundo their consent to participate and neither did their parents or legal

guardians. Children who did not have stutters developed a stutter during or after the study according to Practical Psychology (2019). Children that participated were not fully aware of why the study was being conducted which can relate back to informed consent but teachers at the orphanage were misled about the intent of the study (Goldfarb, 2006). Johnson and Tudor did not uphold responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children involved in the study as they suffered consequences such as a speech impairment, self-doubt, and social anxiety once the study was finished (Goldfarb, 2006). Lastly, Johnson and Tudor did not properly debrief the children or the teachers at the orphanage once they finished the study. All five of these are unethical violations that go directly against the American Psychological Association's Code of Conduct (2017).

Section 3: Human Relations 3.10 Informed Consent is found within the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct (2017), psychologists must document oral or written consent of those who are participating in research studies. In this case, minors such as the children in the "Monster Study", must give their assent to Johnson and Tudor (American Psychological Association, 2017). Psychologists must explain to children in a way that they understand based on their age and potential mental health status, an explanation of the study and why it is being conducted, along with their agreement to participate whether they write it out or speak it to the psychologist. Oulton et al., (2016) discusses various factors that can influence assent in children such as age, mental health status, their ability to communicate their thoughts, and if they can make a decision on their own. Johnson and Tudor should have taken the time to gain assent from the children before starting their study.

Psychologists are expected to uphold the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct (2017) and provide potential participants, in this case the

children in the study, with an explanation of what the study is and why it is being conducted, gain their assent, consider the child's best interests, and get permission from their legal guardian or parent. "When consent by a legally authorized person is not permitted or required by law, psychologists take reasonable steps to protect the individual's rights and welfare." (American Psychological Association, 2017). Lack of informed consent is a violation of the American Psychological Association's Code of Ethics (2017) as this study was conducted in an orphanage where parental consent was not possible nor was legal consent. Although studies like this were common in the late 1930s, Johnson and Tudor did not disclose the purpose of this study nor did they take reasonable measures to ensure the childrens' safety. (Ambrose, 2002)

Psychological Harm

Concerns are raised on the speech disorders such as stuttering that some children developed after the study (Goldfarb, 2006). Life-long negative consequences such as anxiety, insecurities, avoiding social settings, and poor academic performance are implications of what children in the study might have suffered from as well. "All of the children in this group showed overt behavioral changes," Mary Tudor wrote in her thesis" (Goldfarb, 2006, p. 9). This brings to light ethical standards that would be violated such as Section 3.04 Avoiding Harm in the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017), especially if this study was conducted in twenty twenty four. The American Psychological Association's Code of Ethics (2017) makes it clear that psychologists must take actionable steps to avoid harm in research participants. This includes physical, mental, or emotional harm in any way. Recognizing positive behavior is necessary for childrens' development as it helps shape identity, moral reasoning, and enhances their ability to think through different social perspectives in various scenarios (Law, et al., 2012). Many children, and

even adults, do better with positive reinforcement. This is likely why the children in the “normal speakers” group had no negative reaction once the study was completed according to Practical Psychology (2019).

Ntuli et al (2020) found that orphaned children tend to experience long-term psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, sadness, isolation, and anger. Most orphaned children experience death at an early age whether it be of their mother or father, abandonment, or abuse which leads to various psychological symptoms as mentioned above. The negative speech therapy they received by Johnson and his researchers did not benefit the children who participated in the study, rather it may have exacerbated the psychological issues they already experience. A researcher from Johnson’s team wrote, “I believe that in time they... will recover, but we certainly made a definite impression on them.” (Practical Psychology, 2019, p. 1) This statement made by one of Johnson’s researchers, proves that children suffered psychological harm from the study which could take years to fully recover from, or in some cases where they never fully recover. According to BBC News (2007), a one million dollar payout was given to six of the participants from Johnson’s study in 2007. The participants, who are now in their 70s and 80s, explained that Johnson’s experiment left them with emotional and psychological scars (BBC News, 2007).

Unfair Discrimination

Furthermore, since orphans were used it may lead to the question of Unfair Discrimination, found in Section 3.01 in the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017). Questions on whether or not orphans were used in the study because they did not have a family to return home to does not justify unfair treatment and potential harm. Principle E: Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity of the

American Psychological Association (2017) expects psychologists to respect the worth of all people along with the rights of confidentiality, privacy, and self-determination. Psychologists must also protect these rights of individuals, which it is clear they did not do in Johnson's study. Having orphans participate in research studies is a controversial topic due to many negative experiences they already go through at such a young age. Dorsey et al (2015) explains that orphaned children experience increased rates of posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTS), depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and grief. This confirms that orphans are a vulnerable population and extensive assessments should have been conducted prior to the study to rule out potential discrimination based on their mental health status and living situations.

Deception of the Study

Children that participated in Johnson's study did not know they were even a part of a study until sixty years later (Practical Psychology, 2019). Section 8.07 Deception in Research from the American Psychological Association's Code of Conduct (2017) states that psychologists should not deceive research participants especially if it is expected to cause physical pain or emotional implications. Johnson and his team should have been aware that giving children who do not have stutters negative speech therapy would result in negative consequences for a child. The children involved were deceived because they were not made aware not only of the intent of the study but that there was a study being conducted to begin with. If I had to make a guess, most of the children involved likely thought they were going to a speech therapy class to help them alongside their schoolwork they were already learning in the orphanage. In certain cases deception may be necessary and ethical. An example would be if it preserved the integrity of the study and was unlikely to harm any of the participants. Informed consent is required here by psychologists telling their participants that some details may be

withheld from them, but will be revealed at a later time. Debriefing is also necessary in a case like this. This is where psychologists explain the purpose of the study and explain any information they left out at the beginning. Johnson and his team did not do this for the orphans in his study.

Failure to Debrief

Johnson and his team failed to debrief participants once the study was concluded. Debriefing is necessary to inform those involved in the study of the true intent behind why the study was conducted in the first place (American Psychological Association, 2017). This also allows them to clear up any confusion participants may have had throughout the duration of the study and potentially prevent harm caused by deception. We now know that according to Practical Psychology (2019), participants were not made aware they were in a study or that the study even existed until sixty years later. Deception can also create a trust issue between participants and psychologists. Especially in terms of orphans, as mentioned previously they tend to suffer from psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, isolation, and anger according to Ntuli, et al, (2020). If those children ever needed to seek out a therapist for issues they may have been struggling with prior to the study as adults, they might be hesitant to trust a psychologist if they found out they were participants in a study they did not know existed. When researching children, psychologists must take reasonable measures to protect them from harm. Orphans are a very vulnerable population which makes deception worse in their case especially because they suffered harm in the long run.

Ethical Responsibility

Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility states that psychologists take responsibility for their behavior, manage conflicts that could lead to harm or exploitation, uphold standards of conduct, and clarify their professional roles according to the American Psychological Association (2017). Throughout the “Monster Study”, Johnson and his team did neither of this throughout the duration of the study. Johnson’s team did not gain the orphan’s assent prior to beginning the study or consent from teachers/workers at the orphanage, they did not clarify their professional roles, manage conflicts, or take accountability for their behavior. In this case, according to the American Psychological Association (2017), they violated Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility and did not uphold ethical responsibility. Additionally, Johnson’s study was never published. This raises concern for the ethical implications Johnson inflicted upon the orphans. It also raises the question if Johnson and his team of researchers knew that the study was unethical and would face consequences or backlash from the public if the study was published. Due to this, ongoing education and awareness of ethical principles is necessary throughout the field of psychology. The “Monster Study” conducted by Johnson and Tudor is a great example of why the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles and Code of Ethics (2017) was created. Human beings have the right to bodily autonomy and basic ethical treatment. Without having set guidelines, experiments such as that conducted by Johnson can lead to psychological harm and distress to participants. Psychologists must work to protect their research participants, which is something Johnson and Tudor neglected to do. Studies like this are important to discuss so future researchers do not make similar mistakes and uphold the American Psychological Association’s Code of Ethics (2017).

Ethical Codes in Question

The American Psychological Association's Principles and Code of Conduct (2017) are in question for various reasons. In regards to informed consent or assent, the children involved in the study had their autonomy questioned. They did not get the chance to make a decision about their involvement in the study and give their assent to Johnson and his team. The orphans also suffered from emotional damage throughout the rest of their childhood and adult lives according to an article from BBC News (2007). Section 3.04 Avoiding Harm of The American Psychological Association (2017) states that psychologists must take steps to avoid harming their clients or research participants. This means that conducting a thorough assessment prior to the study is necessary to rule out vulnerable populations who may not benefit during or after the study. Johnson and his team knew they would be giving one group of children negative reinforcement during their speech therapy sessions. Most psychologists can hypothesize that not every child will benefit from negative reinforcement, so this should have been made aware of by Johnson to the orphans or the teachers at the orphanage. Johnson also chose twenty two orphans for his study and did not state his reasoning for choosing this population. Section 3.01 Unfair Discrimination from American Psychological Association (2017) is brought to light here. It appears that Johnson may have discriminated based on the orphans' socioeconomic status. Furthermore, Johnson deceived the orphans and teachers as they were not aware they were in a study until sixty years later according to Practical Psychology (2019). Johnson also failed to debrief the orphans and teachers once he concluded his experiment which goes directly against the American Psychological Association's Code of Ethics (2017) Section 8.08 Debriefing.

Personal Recommendations

In terms of what I would do if I was in the position of Johnson, I would take a vastly different approach that prioritizes the ethical well-being of my participants. I would start by

gaining assent from the children. I would take the time to talk to each of them and explain that I was going to be conducting a study, my reasoning for conducting the study, and how I need their help. As Oulton (2016) mentions, I would take into consideration their age, mental health status, and their ability to communicate their thoughts/feelings to me. As for using orphans, I may not go that direction entirely or if I do, I would only use a select handful and not have the entire population of the study be orphans so that results do not have the chance to be skewed. I would also spend time understanding their mental health status, especially for the orphans. Since they are a more vulnerable population, I would not want to risk further potential harm to a child if they are already struggling with anxiety, low self-esteem, abandonment, depression, or anger. I would make it known that they have the right to withdrawal at any time if they wish. I would not say that statement once, but throughout the entire duration of my study. I would also make it clear that there would be no repercussions if a child decides to withdraw from the study. An extensive screening and assessment on the children is also necessary. This way, I can understand who might be more at risk for psychological harm if they are more sensitive to certain topics like trauma, for example.

From there, I would ensure that psychological harm would not be done on any of the children involved. This would take careful consideration on my part for how I would design the experiment and take into consideration the children involved throughout every aspect while the study is being conducted. Conducting research that is minimal risk to children is important to me. I likely would offer therapeutic benefits regarding speech therapy to help improve children's stutters, which would not cause psychological harm to them in the long-term. I personally believe that most children benefit in positive, supportive environments which is what I would utilize throughout the study. Biglan et al (2012) explains recent studies in psychology that have

demonstrated many psychological and behavioral issues decrease as individuals develop greater psychological flexibility. This concept involves gaining clarity about personal values, being mindful of an individual's emotions and thoughts, and making an effort to take action that aligns with their values even if our own internal challenges make it difficult to do so. "The highest priority environments are families and schools, since they influence child and adolescent development and since most problems develop during childhood or adolescence." (Biglan, et al, 2012, p. 10) If I am conducting a research experiment on children, it will likely take months to years to complete. This means that I need to provide a safe and nurturing environment where children can thrive while conducting my research. Finally, I would make sure I had a supervisor to report back to who can hold me accountable and make sure I am following the American Psychological Associations (2017) guidelines properly and that I am upholding ethical standards.

The "Monster Study" conducted by Wendell Johnson and Mary Tudor in 1939 acts as a strong example of unethical research practices in the psychological field. Johnson and Tudor failed to obtain assent from the children and informed consent from their legal guardians, inflict psychological harm on participants that stayed with them for years into their adult lives, deceived participants, neglected to debrief the study to the children and legal guardians, and psychologists did not take accountability for their actions throughout the duration of the experiment.

Guidelines are set forth by the American Psychological Association (2017) to keep psychologists in check and held accountable not only during research and experiments but any other services provided by psychologists to the public. The children who participated in the study suffered from long-term psychological symptoms such as anxiety, speech disorders, and social issues which further emphasize the need for ethical guidelines in a psychological setting to protect research participants, clients, or patients. Studies like this need to be discussed within the current field of

psychology so we can reflect on previous mistakes and prevent similar mistakes from being made as much as possible in our future psychologist generations. By understanding and learning from past mistakes, we can continue following guidelines created by the American Psychological Association (2017) and hold ourselves accountable for future research and the protection of all participants involved.

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