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Benchmark - Ethics in Research

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Benchmark - Ethics in Research

Oren and Barilan (2017) explain that the different fields of academics involve a wide range of topics that requires research activities to unearth specific details about an issue or phenomenon laden with controversy. Primarily, to arrive at a specified result, scholars use research methodologies to test hypotheses before making conclusive arguments. However, in conducting research, scholars or scientists must take caution by adhering to the ethical aspects of such endeavors. Markedly, such measures prevent physical, psychological, or financial ramifications that result from unethical practices when conducting research (Oren & Barilan, 2017). An analysis of Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment and the ethical challenges involved provides a framework to review the current standards of research.

Philip Zimbardo's Lucifer Effect

Bornus (2016) explains that to prove his theory on the effects of situations on the behavior of an individual, Philip Zimbardo came up with the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). The SPE was a hypothetical experiment that involves twenty-four students acting as prisoners and prison wardens. In particular, twelve students acted as prisoners while the others acted as prison wardens in a controlled environment with both parties acting in simulated conditions. In retrospect, the experiment was cut short after some students acting as prisoners developed psychological trauma. The experiment brings out the issue of the nature of research and the ethics that surround experimentation (Bornus, 2016).

Gina (2018) writes that the SPE experiment aimed to prove Zimbardo's hypothesis of the Lucifer effect. Primarily, the Lucifer effect analyzes the quick changes in behavior from morally upright to undesirable among individuals. In particular, Zimbardo's efforts in psychology and the SPE geared towards understanding the factors that result in the Lucifer effect. Markedly, Zimbardo held that the drastic change in behavior among individuals is due to the situation at hand. Changes in behavior among the experimental subjects resulted from the simulation of a prison environment and the placement of the social context of each group (Gina, 2018).

Ethical Implications and Ramifications of the SPE

The naivety of the SPE experiment brings about the topic of the ethical issues that relate to research and experiments in academic endeavors. Markedly, experiments such as the SPE involve high degrees of influence in the psychological aspect of subjects (Ray & Mathai, 2018). As such, poor definition of experimental outcomes as in SPE results in unethical experiences that may result in lawsuits. Also, Zimbardo did not accurately explain the factors and controls of the experiment to his subjects before 'arresting' them at Stanford. Thus, such an experiment or research activity is unethical because it is not honest in describing the conditions of study to human subjects (Ray & Mathai, 2018).

Experiments such as the SPE carried by Zimbardo fall under the characterization of careless and negligent research, given their potential to cause harm. Notably, experiments of such kinds can cause physical or psychological harm to subjects due to the poor definition of research (Oren & Barilan, 2017). In particular, physical harm may result from exposure of subjects under study to elements or conditions that result in injury. Conversely, psychological harm, as in Zimbardo's experiment, may result from poorly designed experiments that expose subjects to emotional torture (Gina, 2018). In retrospect, the SPE designed the prison wardens to

be unexceptionally cruel to prisoners, which resulted in their withdrawal from the experiment due to psychological torture.

Institutional Review Boards (IRB) Standards

Following irregularities and complacency in research during or before the 20th century, the United States and other nations put measures to curb irresponsible research involving human subjects. In particular, the IRB includes the standard for the respect of all persons that provides autonomy among subjects in participation in research experiments (Oren & Barilan, 2017). As such, this provision invalidates the SPE experiment because Zimbardo did not get full consent from patients before subjecting them to the experiment. The IRB also includes a beneficence clause that prioritizes benefits to human subjects instead of harm (Ray & Mathai, 2018). Thus, this clause invalidates the research experiment by Zimbardo because he had the aim of benefiting his theory as opposed to minimizing harm to human subjects.

The IRB also provides a guideline that allows for justice in research involving human subjects. Essentially, this mandates experiments to distribute research burdens to human subjects equitably to avoid conflicts of interest (Bornus, 2016). As such, this IRB mandate invalidates the SPE experiment by Zimbardo because he placed high burdens on students acting as prisoners. The IRB classifies research activities into exempt, expedited, and full review, depending on the urgency and severity of its methodology (Ray & Mathai, 2018). Thus, this invalidates Zimbardo's research because of its approach to the experiment as an exempt study instead of its status as a full review study involving human subjects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research methodologies that scientists and scholars apply that involve human subjects must meet the specifications of ethical conduct. As in Zimbardo's SPE experiment, poor design of a research methodology may result in psychological or physical harm to human subjects. However, guidelines are in place, such as the IRB that regulates research activities that involve human subjects. Thus, experiments must comply to these guidelines to meet the ethical aspects of using human beings in studies that involve experiments that may result in considerable physical or psychological harm.

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