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“One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes…It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually…they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery”. So goes the story of the utopian town of Omelas (Le Guin, Peiche & Press, 1993), where the unparalleled happiness of thousands depends on the unimaginable suffering of a single child. Le Guin’s deontological metaphor is a powerful response to John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian argument that right and wrong is decided purely on the basis of the greater good in that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness” (Mill, 1863) and it is largely on Le Guin’s (or indeed Immanuel Kant’s) side of the argument that The American Psychological Association’s (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, The British Psychological Societies (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct and the Psychological Society of Ireland’s (PSI) Code of Professional Ethics fall.

Had they fallen on the other side of the argument, one could justify any experiment on the basis that its benefits outweigh its costs and there would be no debate about studies such as Wiesel and Hubel’s (1963), where they taped shut the eyelids of kittens to deprive them of vision, thereby learning about the development of the visual cortex, Seligman and Maier’s (1967) studies where dogs were conditioned to accept rather than try to escape electric shocks thus establishing the concept of learned helplessness, or Harlow’s (1958) “cloth mother” experiments, where baby Rhesus macaques were raised from birth with an inanimate “mother
figure” made from either wire or cloth resulting in important advances in our understanding of the needs of the developing infant. Studies involving obliteration in humans - the administration of lesions to cause selective brain damage - could be justified too on the basis that, as was the case with patient HM and memory (Scoville & Milner, 1957), great advances could be made in learning about various brain functions by doing so.

This, consequentialist approach would have made ethical decision-making relatively simple, the human benefits and costs of the experiment could be empirically weighed leading to an informed and objective decision, as it is however, this is not the case. John Rawls (1971) wrote of justice that “each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others” (pp. 3, 4) and The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct takes a similar view in relation to psychological experimentation. It states that in conducting research the psychologist should “do unto others as you would be done by” and it makes its deontological approach clear by going so far as to quote Kant himself: “Act on such maxims as you could will to become universal law” (BPS, 2009, p. 4). Ethical decision-making therefore, is not so straightforward and inevitably “occasions arise when there is a conflict between ethical principles… that are not easily resolved” (Howitt & Cramer, 2011, p. 144) and it is for this reason that the professional bodies produce these codes to guide behaviour. The APA code is based on the five principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence (seeking to benefit and not harm others), fidelity and responsibility, integrity, justice and respect (APA, 2010, pp. 3, 4) and the BPS and PSI codes follow a similar line based on the four principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity (BPS, 2009, p. 9, PSI, 2003, pp. 3, 4). These documents all emphasise the position of responsibility of the psychologist for the welfare of participants in research and they contain guidelines including the obligation for researchers to gain informed consent from participants (APA, 2010, p. 6, p. 10), to treat participants data with confidence (p. 7, p. 12), to procure animals for research in the prescribed
manner, to treat animals as humanely as possible (p. 3, p. 11), to use deception only when it is necessary for the study and when it will not cause distress and, when using deception, to fully debrief participants (p. 11). In most instances, institutional approval will be required to carry out research and, if it is not clear from the research proposal that the ethical guidelines are being adhered to, the ethics committees of the relevant institution will not allow the study to proceed.

Ultimately, the purpose of ethical codes is to ensure that the profession continues to benefit society as a whole while minimising instances of distress but, as evidenced by the rejection of the utilitarian approach, this is not its sole purpose. The deontological approach taken by the codes of conduct encapsulates a morality that resonates with that of the public and this is important for a number of reasons. Following the logic that that, if one has no inherent moral code then one must be policed by a party that does, for example the government, it becomes clear that conveying a sense of morality is essential to maintaining autonomy. The profession wishes to retain its powers of self-regulation (Howitt & Cramer, 2011) and if it was to become governed by legislation, thereby becoming policed by non-psychologists, this would be likely to result in the restriction of the activities of its members and fewer advances in the field. The profession needs to resonate with the public for reasons of economic survival too (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). Ultimately it is the public who employ the services of psychologists and for this relationship to be fruitful there needs to be a sense of trust. This sense of trust is nurtured by the existence of the codes themselves and by the behaviour that they promote.

When we consider ethics in psychology we invariably think of studies that have been widely criticised for the potentially damaging effects on their participants. Studies like Milgrim’s (1963) obedience experiment, Zimbardo’s (1971) Stanford Prison study or Watson’s little Albert experiments (Watson & Rayner, 1920), are the spectacular examples of ethically questionable research and, while these studies have surely damaged the credibility of the profession in some ways, it could be argued that they have similarly benefited the profession by showing the public
(amplified by media attention) the power of psychology to unearth undeniable truths about human behaviour under certain conditions. In spite of the high profile of these particular studies it may be argued that the more significant risk to psychology comes from ethical practices that are much less visible. Perhaps the more dangerous practices are those that are motivated by a combination of the "publish or perish" nature of psychological research and the preference of psychological journals for publishing significant and unexpected results. It has been argued (New York Times, 2011) that these conditions were a factor in the case of Deidrik Stapel, of Tilburg University in The Netherlands who was found to have falsified his data in "several dozen" studies over a period of ten years. As Jonathan Schooler, a psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara put it “It’s almost like everyone is on steroids, and to compete you have to take steroids as well.” (New York Times, 2011)

The final report into the Stapel case noted that “‘minor misdemeanours’: some data massage, the omission of some unwelcome observations, ‘favourable’ rounding off or summarizing, etc… is not categorized [in the European Code of Ethics] under the ‘big three’ (fabrication, falsification, plagiarism) but it is, in principle, equally unacceptable and may, if not identified or corrected, easily lead to more serious breaches of standards of integrity” (Leveldt Committee, Noort Committee & Drenth Committee, 2012, pp. 57, 58). In what could be interpreted as an indication of a suspicion of these practices following a number of spectacular results in the area of priming research including Bargh, Chen and Burrows (1996) and Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg (1998) (Yong, 2012), Nobel laureate Dan Kanheman published an open letter to researchers working in the field informing them that “colleagues who in the past accepted your surprising results as facts… have now attached a question mark to the field”. These doubts, and Kanheman’s letter have in turn prompted “The Reproducibility Project” led by researchers Brian Nosek, Jeffrey Spies and others, which is “the first known empirical effort to estimate the reproducibility of a sample of studies from the scientific literature” (http://openscienceframework.org, 2011, 2012), and will systematically reproduce studies

Given the comprehensive nature of the ethics codes, the emphasis on ethics in psychology training and the proliferation of ethics committees, it is highly unlikely that a practitioner in psychology today will become involved in a study as ethically questionable as Milgrim’s obedience study or Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison study. It is far more likely that they will be confronted with ethical issues of the secondary type arising from the desire to get specific results or pressure to be published and, much like the utilitarian scientist may argue that the suffering of one participant is justified when outweighed by the benefit of the experiment to society as a whole, the “minor misdemeanor” required to achieve the desired result may seem utterly insignificant when compared to the utopian vision that is offered by achieving it. In Le Guin’s story, when the children of Omelas reached a certain age they were brought to see the imprisoned child and it was explained to them that their idyllic lifestyle was dependent on it’s suffering. Often they would “go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom” (p. 6). Some however do not. “Some go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates” (p. 7) and this is what must be done by the psychologist who is tempted to turn a blind eye to the “minor misdemeanor”. They must count themselves amongst the ones who walk away from Omelas.
References


Levett Committee, Noort Committee & Drenth Committee (2012). *Flawed science: The fraudulent research practices of social psychologist Diederik Stapel*


