

Psychological Research & Ethics: The Zimbardo Prison Experiment as a Case Study

NCSS Thematic Strand: Individual Development and Identity

Grade Level: 11-12

Class Periods Required: One 50 minute period

Purpose, Background and Context:

In reaction to horrific experiments perpetrated on humans, including those by the Nazis, governments, including the United States, have legally restricted the kinds of experiments behavioral scientists can legally conduct. Since the end of World War II, these laws and regulations have become increasingly restrictive. Furthermore research universities now have organizations that review every experiment behavioral scientists propose to conduct to insure the procedures will not harm human beings.

The use of humans in experiments, as noted, has become increasingly regulated. Experiments conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, could not have been conducted today. Some important and highly influential psychological experiments would not meet the today's ethical requirements. Among the most famous of those experiments were those designed and implemented by psychologists Philip Zimbardo, Stanley Milgram, and Albert Bandura. These three scientists conducted ground breaking research which, in all likelihood, would not have been allowed due to the potential harm they might cause human subjects participating in them.

Today social science research must meet standards set by the Human Subjects Review Boards (HRB). At universities throughout the United States these boards review scientists' proposals to conduct experiments that would use human subjects. If HRB members regard the proposals as potentially harming human subjects in any way, then a board would insist the experiment be either changed or not go forward. Many scientists have complained that Boards have too much power and inhibit the conduct of valuable social science research.

In this lesson plan students will review whether and to what extent one of the most famous experiments meets today's ethical standards: the Zimbardo Prison experiment. Philip Zimbardo framed his research questions in these terms: "Why and under what conditions do humans obey authority. Under what conditions will they obey immoral orders or instructions from their "superiors"? Under what conditions to superiors give orders for their subordinates to enact unethical behaviors against others?"

Students, after viewing a re-enactment of the experiment, will assess: what they learned about humans, and their obedience to authority, from the experiment's results; whether or to what extent the experiment was ethical; and how a scientist could find ethical ways to study human obedience to authority.

Objectives & Student Outcomes:

Students will:

- ❖ Evaluate ethical concerns in Zimbardo experiment;
- ❖ Analyze examples of experiments to determine if they ethical or unethical or might be changed in ways to make them ethical;
- ❖ Understand the importance in changes in ethical concerns in psychological research;
- ❖ Identify potential problems in experiments that could bring about ethical concerns.

Materials:

- ❖ Video footage from Philip Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment
- ❖ Primary photos from famous psychological experiments
- ❖ PowerPoint of research/ethics information

Procedures:

Procedure 1:

Introduce the topic of ethics in psychological research with photos from famous experiments.

Ask students what they understand by the terms "ethical" or "unethical."

Procedure 2:

Show Prison Experiment video

Procedure 3:

Discuss with students the questions:

- ❖ What did Zimbardo want to find out from conducting his experiment?
- ❖ What experimental conditions did he put in place to answer his research questions?
- ❖ Do you think his findings were valuable?
- ❖ Were his experimental research methods ethical or unethical?
- ❖ How might we conduct an ethical experiment to find out why humans obey immoral orders or instructions?

Procedure 4:

Distribute handout with examples of famous psychological experiments

Have students complete worksheet describing how the researcher could make their experiment ethical.

Summarize lesson by asking students questions about assignment to share with other groups.

Assessment of Outcomes:

Student participation in discussion

Worksheet used to analyze various examples of ethical/unethical experimentation. The students will submit the worksheets, enabling the teacher to monitor individual student understanding.

Extensions and Adaptations:

Use other video examples to explain ethical and unethical aspects of experiments.

Show examples of highly ethical research to analyze.

Divide class into groups by different experiments to complete worksheet; report back to group

Resources:

Albert Bandura Experiment:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bobo_doll_experiment#Method.281961.29

John Watson Experiment: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Albert_experiment

Research Resources: <http://www.experiment-resources.com/ethics-in-research.html>

Stanford Prison Experiment: <http://www.prisonexp.org/>

Stanley Milgram Experiment: <http://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

United States Holocaust Memorial: <http://www.ushmm.org/>