

The current relevance of three classical cases of social research: Milgram, Humphreys, and Zimbardo

La relevancia actual de tres casos clásicos de investigación social: Milgram, Humphreys y Zimbardo

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Abstract

Background: Research ethics in social sciences is of great relevance for the protection of participants. **Objective:** To conduct an ethical analysis of three classic cases of social science research: Milgram's experiment of obedience to authority; Humphreys' tearoom trade; and Zimbardo's prison experiment. **Methods:** A problematic ethical analysis of the cases was carried out. The main ethical debates raised by the cases were reconstructed in their historical context and the ethical issues were considered from a current perspective. **Results:** The relevance of the ethical analysis of the classic cases of research ethics in social sciences and the relevance of carrying out an ethical analysis from the current concepts of research ethics were shown. **Conclusion:** The need for an independent ethical evaluation of ethical issues was revealed to adequately understand and evaluate social science research and its methodological richness.

Keywords: Research ethics. Social science. Risk. Deception. Informed consent.

Resumen

Antecedentes: La ética de investigación en ciencias sociales es de gran relevancia para la protección de las personas participantes. **Objetivo:** Realizar un análisis ético de tres casos clásicos de investigación en ciencias sociales: el experimento de obediencia a la autoridad de Milgram, el tearoom trade de Humphreys y el experimento de la prisión de Zimbardo. **Método:** Se llevó a cabo un análisis ético problemático de los casos. Se reconstruyeron los principales debates éticos suscitados por los casos en su contexto histórico y se consideraron

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Date of reception: 15-02-2024

Date of acceptance: 25-03-2024

DOI: 10.24875/BUP.24000003

Available online: 24-10-2024

BIOETHICS Update 2024;10(2):105-118

www.bioethicsupdate.com

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las cuestiones éticas desde una perspectiva actual. Resultados: Se mostró la relevancia del análisis ético de los casos clásicos de ética de la investigación en ciencias sociales y la pertinencia de realizar un análisis ético desde los conceptos actuales de ética de la investigación. Conclusión: Se puso de manifiesto la necesidad de una evaluación ética independiente de las cuestiones éticas con el fin de comprender y evaluar adecuadamente la investigación en ciencias sociales y su riqueza metodológica.

Palabras clave: *Ética en investigación. Ciencias sociales. Riesgo. Engaño. Consentimiento informado.*

Introduction

The three classic cases of social research reconstructed below share a central characteristic: their public repercussion due to the surprising nature of their findings and the research strategies that they used to arrive at these results¹. The cases generated great controversy in relation to ethical issues both in academic and non-academic settings². The procedures used, the use of deception, covert observation, the very relevance of the research, and the possible harm that could have been caused were intensely questioned.

In this article, we ask the following questions: Are these cases still relevant? What is the place of ethics within the social sciences and how much of what transpired has modified guidelines and behaviors? What is still pending or unresolved?

Stanley Milgram studied obedience to authority through a laboratory experiment; Laud Humphreys observed sexual behavior in public restrooms in parks; and Philip Zimbardo investigated the dynamics between “guards and prisoners” in a simulated prison. In the following, each case will be developed separately and the most salient features of each will be pointed out. Then, the ethical issues will be discussed from a current research ethics perspective. This review of the cases aims to highlight the relevance and validity of conducting an ethical analysis of classic social science research cases. It is not the aim of this article to condemn researchers but rather to learn from these cases for the exercise of social research ethics today³. Finally, we will argue for the importance of an independent evaluation of ethical issues that manifest themselves in social research.

Milgram and the experiment of obedience to authority

Is it possible to observe the conditions under which an individual may disobey the instructions of a person in a position of authority?⁴ Between 1961 and 1964 social psychologist, Stanley Milgram sought to answer this question through an innovative experiment on obedience conducted at Yale University. It was a case of seemingly ordinary people obeying the demands of their superiors to facilitate nefarious ends. One of the most extreme examples of such obedience manifested itself during the Nazi regime.

With these historical facts in mind, Milgram set out to recreate in a controlled environment the situation in which an individual is compelled to do something even against his will in response to orders given by an authority:

“This article describes a procedure for the study of destructive obedience in the laboratory. It consists of ordering a naive S [subject] to administer increasingly more severe punishment to a victim in the context of a learning experiment. Punishment is administered by means of a shock generator with 30 graded switches ranging from Slight Shock to Danger: Severe Shock. The victim is a confederate of the E [experiment]. The primary dependent variable is the maximum shock, the S is willing to administer before he refuses to continue further. Twenty-six Ss obeyed the experimental commands fully and administered the highest shock on the generator. Fourteen Ss broke off the experiment at some point after the victim protested and refused to provide further answers. The procedure created extreme levels of nervous tension in some Ss. Profuse sweating, trembling, and stuttering were typical expressions of this emotional disturbance.”⁵

Participants were called through an advertisement published in local newspapers. It included people with no formal education up to Ph.D. level professionals⁶. Participants were told that they would be randomly assigned to the roles of “teachers” or “students.” In truth, the real participants in the research were those who served as “teachers.” The person who participated as a “student” was allied with the research team. The “researcher” was the one who played the role of *authority* and was represented by Milgram, who called himself “Professor William.” The “student” had to remember a series of words and if he failed, the “professor” was compelled by the authority to apply electric shocks ranging from 15 to 450 volts¹.

This experiment was repeated on numerous occasions and a total of 636 people were included in the study⁴. Most of the participants were male although females were also included in some of the repetitions of the experiment. The results: about 66% of the total number of participants applied the most severe electric shocks following the orders given by the authority⁷.

At the conclusion of the experiment, participants were informed of the true purpose of the experiment and were shown that the electric shocks were fictitious and were reunited with the “student” to verify that he or she had not suffered any *real* damage⁷.

When the experiment was publicized in the Psychology Department of Yale University, the focus of the debate was on the surprising nature of Milgram’s findings rather than on the ethical questions of the experiment. It was common in those years for laboratory research to deceive participants. Notwithstanding, this prevailing climate in the Psychology Department, an anonymous complaint was filed with the American Psychological Association (APA) about the ordeal Milgram put the participants through. As a consequence, Milgram’s APA membership was withheld for a period of 1 year⁷.

First ethical questions about the experiment: risk, deception, and relevance

Although Milgram continued with different versions of the same experiment, criticism and ethical questions about his experiments never ceased to emerge. The general ethical debate revolved around two main issues. The first was the possible psychological and emotional damage to the participants due to the stress experienced during and after the experiment. The second was the ethics of deceiving the participants.

Regarding potential damage, Milgram himself describes in detail that participants manifested signs of extreme tension: “[s]ubjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh.”⁵ However, he did not understand the magnitude of what he had done with the participants and compared it to the feeling a student might have when failing an exam or digging their fingernails into their own hands while watching a Hitchcock movie⁶. Furthermore, according to Milgram, the “obedient subject” did not blame himself for the electric shocks inflicted on the victim because they considered that the act did not originate in themselves but rather came from authority⁸. With this argument, Milgram tried to defend himself against the accusation of harm the participants.

The deception of the participants was also questioned since they were informed that they were going to take part in a study on memory. The omission of central information regarding the true purpose of the research did not allow for a genuinely autonomous participation of the persons involved. Milgram, however, contemplated two key ethical aspects: first, he carried out a *debriefing* informing them what the study really consisted of. Then, he did a post-experimental follow-up of them. According to several authors, it is the first follow-up of its kind to corroborate that there was no lasting harm or adverse effect on the participants^{3,9}.

Milgram minimized the effects of deception on participants, as he believed that the post-experimental debriefing session was sufficient to clear any feelings of discomfort⁸. This view rested on the post-experimental follow-up that he conducted through a survey to assess long-term effects on participants. However, it was arguably not just the deception in itself that was questionable. First, participants were asked to sign a sort of informed consent form, although with false information regarding the true objective of the experiment and the conditions under which it was to be carried out⁵. Furthermore, Milgram had intentionally designed various strategies to dissuade them from dropping out of the study. Finally, Sieber and Tolich point out another problematic dimension that was the use of deception to incite participants to perform very questionable acts:

“One might argue that it is not the deception per se that bothers people. Rather, it is the powerful induction to do something wrong (coupled with deception) that is troubling.”²

The final questionable aspect is the relevance and justification of this research. The tendency of human beings to obey the orders of an authority which had been proven in various historical facts. Milgram himself quotes Hannah Arendt to account for this. What new information could be added to this existing body of knowledge? Was this data valuable enough to justify the deception of the participants and the risks to which they were exposed? Even if it could be justified that Milgram’s first experiment was relevant, as it provided important percentages and data validated by the design proposed, neither his subsequent experiments nor variations of it by others seem justifiable. The experiment continued to be recreated over and over again, although with some variations on the original format⁷. It was repeated by other authors nine more times in North America and was replicated in eight different countries including Italy, South Africa, Germany, Jordan, Australia, Austria, Spain, and India. The results were similar with an average obedience rate of 66%⁷. Despite all the criticism received, Milgram continued to defend his experiments on obedience to authority throughout his life.

Humphreys and the *tearoom trade*

The research known as *tearoom trade* was conducted by Laud Humphreys as part of his graduate studies between 1965 and 1968. Humphreys served as an episcopal pastor for 10 years³. As part of his work as a pastor, he became familiar with the homosexual community and the harassment and discrimination it suffered at a time when homosexual practices were considered a crime as well as morally questionable. His thesis advisor recommended that he investigate a subculture of this, specifically a particular phenomenon of human interaction that had been scarcely investigated: impersonal sexual encounters between men in public places: park bathrooms, cars, etc^{1,10}.

He set out to study this through direct observation of *tearooms*: that is, places where males of all racial, social, educational, and physical characteristics gather for fleeting and anonymous sexual encounters¹¹. He witnessed hundreds of sexual encounters between males, mainly episodes of oral sex. He did not reveal his identity as a sociologist but pretended to be just another participant, specifically a “*watch queen*,” that is, the person who observes the sexual acts but does not actively participate in them in exchange for watching for approaching strangers¹¹. To learn more about the men, he interviewed 12 of them, whom he called *the intensive dozen*. Anticipating possible biases, and to have a more representative sample, he took note of the license plates of hundreds of cars of the people who had attended the *tearooms* and then surveyed them without revealing his identity as a sociologist. Through a “friendly police officer,” he obtained the names, brands, and years of the cars and obtained their home addresses, marital status, and occupation.

Through a colleague, he managed to get the males in his sample included in an actual survey that was taking place in the area where he had conducted his research¹¹. A year after the observations were made and having deliberately changed his appearance and his car, he went to the homes of these men and without revealing who he was and what he had observed in the *tearooms* he questioned them about a variety of topics such as marriage, family, work, social life, and even sex life¹².

One of the conclusions Humphreys reached with this research is that most of the males observed in the *tearooms* were people with heterosexual lives and did not consider themselves to be homosexual or bisexual¹².

Ethical challenges of covert research

This research provided insight into highly stigmatized behavior regarding homosexual practices. However, it is a matter of debate whether this research has actually helped to reduce stereotypes associated with homosexuality¹⁰. Humphreys was awarded the prestigious annual Charles Wright Award for his work.

However, it generated a great deal of debate about numerous issues: the admissibility of covert observation, the invasion of privacy, the use of deception, the absence of informed consent (according to today’s standards), and the potential harm that such research could bring to participants if their identities were revealed¹³. The risk of harm was significant considering that this was not

only morally controversial but also illegal, conduct. If people's data were leaked, all domains of their lives could be compromised: family life, work, and even jail. The general strategy used by Humphreys to obtain information¹² and the limits of the observation were questioned, since although the place used as a framework for observation was public, the behavior analyzed was private and even intimate¹⁴. Following the men, taking note of the license plates of their cars, obtaining their personal data by deceiving a police officer, and then interviewing the men in their own homes was one of the most critical points of his research that even led the US FBI (*Federal Bureau of Investigation*) to create a file for him³.

Some of the criticisms received by the *tearoom trade* were accepted by Humphreys himself. In the expanded edition of the book, he reflects on this and devotes a significant portion of it to the ethical aspects of his research, reproducing his main critics such as von Hoffman¹⁵ and Warwick¹⁶ as well as some of his defenders.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Humphreys' research was planned in conjunction with his thesis committee, composed of several sociologists, one of whom had published articles on research ethics¹³. This suggests that at the time, the ethical requirements for social research were not clear. Since this case was disclosed, it has been used to argue in favor of the ethical evaluation of social research by a committee¹³.

Zimbardo and the *Prison Experiment*

The third ethically controversial case was social psychologist Philip Zimbardo's prison experiment conducted at Stanford University in 1971 and known as *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (SPE).

The purpose of the research was the psychological study of the actual circumstances of prison life and the effects of imposed social roles on people's behavior. For this purpose, a mock prison [*The Stanford County Prison*] was set up in the basement of the Psychology Department. The prison was equipped with iron-barred cells, a confinement room, and recreation space, among other facilities¹.

In the words of principal investigator Zimbardo:

...“randomly assigned normal, healthy, intelligent college students to enact the roles of either guards or prisoners in a realistically simulated prison setting where they were to live and work for several weeks. [We] wanted to understand some of the dynamics operating in the psychology of imprisonment. How do ordinary people adapt to such an institutional setting? How do the power differentials between guards and prisoners play out in their daily interactions? If you put good people in a bad place, do the people triumph or does the place corrupt them? Would the violence that is endemic to most real prisons be absent in a prison filled with good middle-class boys?”¹⁷

To this end, volunteers were recruited from the university community through the publication of a classified advertisement in a newspaper. The experiment was aimed exclusively at the male population.

Twenty-four youth was selected and randomly assigned to the roles of prisoner and guard. Eleven of them were assigned to the role of *prisoners* and 10 to the role of *guards*. The remainder served as alternates. The experiment was approved by the *Human Subjects Review Committee* of the Department of Psychology and all participants signed an informed consent form. It reported the loss of privacy and stated that they could only withdraw from the experiment for health reasons and with the authorization of the medical consultants and the main researcher: Zimbardo.

The “prisoners” were arrested at their homes without warning on a Sunday morning¹⁸. They were handcuffed, blindfolded, and taken away by the “guards” in a police patrol car as if it were a real arrest.

Guards were given clear limitations on their behavior: they were not allowed to physically harm prisoners. Notwithstanding this, no restrictions were placed on the usual behaviors of guards in real prisons and their tendencies to “psychologically intimidate, degrade, or sexually humiliate prisoners”¹.

The experiment was scheduled to last 2 weeks but was prematurely terminated after 6 days due to “the extreme psychological effects experienced by several participants.”¹¹ From the 1st day, the young men who served as guards began to engage in sadistic behavior toward the prisoners. The guards could not inflict physical harm on the prisoners, but they creatively engaged in sexual humiliation, degradation, and harassment in numerous ways: waking them up successively at night, restricting their food, access to the bathroom, or demanding that they undress¹.

Meanwhile, Zimbardo and his research associates were so intent on witnessing what was happening there that they would not even consider terminating the experiment and were reluctant to let go of prisoners who showed clear signs of stress and suffering.

It was Christina Maslach, Zimbardo's then-partner and current wife, who brought about the termination of the experiment. Maslach had recently received her doctorate in social psychology. On witnessing what was happening in the prison Maslach rebuked Zimbardo and urged him to terminate the experiment:

“She was furious (...). Boys were suffering. As principal investigator, I was personally responsible for their suffering. They were not prisoners, not experimental subjects, but boys, young men, who were being dehumanized and humiliated by other boys who had lost their moral compass in this situation.”¹⁷

Shortly after this episode, Zimbardo ended the experiment. The guards were angry and disappointed that it was over. The prisoners were deeply relieved¹⁷.

Ethical issues in a “role-playing game”

Once the experiment was completed, individual and group interviews were conducted with the participants to corroborate that there was no lasting damage. This follow-up was repeated for several years with most participants¹⁷.

This research was widely criticized mainly for exposing participants to physical, psychological, and emotional harm of considerable magnitude. One of the main ethical issues was the conflict of interest in the whole experiment: Zimbardo served as principal investigator and prison superintendent at the same time. Both the ethics committee and Zimbardo and team failed to see that there were not two types of research participants – guards and prisoners – but a third: prison superintendent². Zimbardo's concern for the participants and their welfare was overridden by his fascination with the experiment and the exceptional nature of what was happening there.

Another central ethical issue was that participants were denied, or in practice delayed from, the possibility of withdrawing from the experiment. In relation to this, another ethical issue worthy of criticism is that the experiment was not terminated earlier when several of the participants manifested states of extreme stress. The psychological and emotional distress and suffering were manifest. It is striking that this happened before the expert eyes of professionals dedicated to psychology.

Unlike the other cases, there was no deception as part of the central research design. However, there were three omissions of information: the surprise arrest of the prisoners, the intentions of creating conflict situations within the “prison,” and the misrepresentation of the information given to the parents on visiting day that the youths were better off than they really were¹.

Although the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, in addition to the generalities mentioned above, it was intended to release the researchers from responsibility in case of any inconvenience.

Zimbardo requested a post-experimental ethical evaluation from the American Psychological Association 2 years after the research was completed. The latter determined that the ethical guidelines existing at the time had been taken into account¹⁷.

Milgram, Humphreys, and Zimbardo's research and its relevance today

These investigations can serve to caricature bad practices but can also specify some still current debates as well as ethical practices embedded in the world of social science research ethics⁴. There are different types of debates: those that question whether it is ethical to deceive; covert observation; or under what conditions research can be conducted when it concerns intimate behaviors. However, there are also other debates that do not question the ethical status of what should be done – for example, not to harm – but that disagree about the extent to which a particular practice is harmful or damaging.

Consenting to participate and withdrawing from an investigation

Returning to Milgram's case, we can see how informed consent was incorporated into research ethics. Undoubtedly this is one of the “milestones” of the already established ethics^{18,19}. In the first case, it can be observed that although there was no initial truthful informed consent, Milgram

incorporates debriefing, that is, reporting what the research consisted of. In this sense, he shows some attention to ethics and introduces a novel methodological element. However, in this type of situation, not only must there be debriefing but there must also be re-consent for the data to be used. This is fairly well established in social science (and clinical) ethics guidelines and codes²⁰⁻²². Note that in Humphreys' study, there is no request for informed consent except in the 12 males (the intensive dozen) to whom he disclosed her identity and the purposes of his research. In Zimbardo's study, although informed consent is present, it suffers from shortcomings: there are serious omissions of information, such as the arrest of the prisoners in their homes, which was not informed in advance. On the other hand, the imposition of conditions for withdrawal, which is present in the informed consent, is not acceptable either, as will be discussed in more detail in the next paragraph. Thus, in a very interesting way, these cases show us different angles and uses of informed consent, the importance of debriefing and re-consenting, providing "all" relevant information without misrepresentation, as well as the limits of what can be included in informed consent.

The three cases presented have in common failures to clearly and explicitly communicate to the participants the information available about the research. In Milgram and Humphreys, deception and covert research were present and were an integral part of the methodological design of the research. In the case of Zimbardo, the intentions of creating conflict situations within the "prison" and observing what happened were not fully revealed to the participants. These points analyzed together with the description of the cases show the failures that the three investigations had linked to free and voluntary consent.

The possibility of withdrawal from research is also a now unquestioned ethical element in research ethics. In Milgram's case, it is absent due to his use of authority preventing the participants' wish to discontinue participation. Zimbardo avoids this by placing conditions on informed consent (that withdrawal be for health reasons, approved by a physician and himself). This inclusion of limits in informed consent is highly questionable because, in addition, informed consent tends to be seen by lay people as legal and not merely ethical commitments, providing another layer of shielding and deterrence to a possible request for withdrawal from the research. Finally, we can see how it is difficult to honor withdrawal requests due to the very fascination of the researcher (which leads us to another ethical problem: conflicts of interest). At present, making explicit and honoring the request for withdrawal from research is an established practice. The informed consent should state that the individual can withdraw at any time and for any reason and that there should be no retaliation or adverse consequence (which is highly relevant when providing any type of therapy).

Is it ever ethically acceptable to deceive participants?

Within the scope of what is still under debate is deception. This clearly emerges in the first two cases. Moreover, although it is a taboo subject, it continues to be present in some current research. In fact, it is endorsed in the ethical guidelines of various professional associations, including the American Psychological and Sociological Associations^{20,21}. However, clear conditions are established to be able to conduct research that involves some type of deception of the participants. For example, the use of deception is raised in research that cannot be conducted because biases would be introduced (quality of health care and adherence to certain practices), or when, to protect the participant, the environment, and the person him/herself are deceived in the first instance. In

some studies on violence or abuse, the nature of the research is hidden so as to enable access to the person who will participate in a careful manner, and then it is explained to that person alone and under protective conditions what the research really consists of. Then, they are asked again if they wish to continue with their participation. In both cases, either for fear of bias in the research or to protect the participant, consent is requested again. Moreover, if research is conducted without prior consent, as soon as it is possible to do so, what the study actually consisted of is disclosed and consent is requested at that time. If the participant refuses to give consent, the data cannot be used. Therefore, the aim is to repair the deception and respect those who participated. Reflection on the legitimacy of deception and its ethical justification continues to be debated despite being endorsed by some ethical guidelines. However, it is also a practice that is more frequent in the social sciences than in the medical sciences⁷.

Covert observation (what is public and what is private and how it should be addressed) was highly contested in Humphreys' research and is contested today because it does not allow participants to voluntarily and autonomously consent to participate in research. Moreover, this case is particularly complex because although it took place in a public place, the behavior was private and intimate. Such debates continue to rage. Although, at present, there is some consensus in accepting observation in cases where individuals cannot be identified and, therefore, affected. Another relevant point is respect for the privacy of individuals. Both Humphreys' and Zimbardo's investigations transcended spaces and actions belonging to the sphere of privacy. Moreover, in both cases, either by concealment or by the refusal to allow withdrawal, those who participated in the investigation were not allowed to take care of those spaces and to consent fully and voluntarily.

How much damage is acceptable and how is it calculated?

Another element to note is the inaccurate weighting of harms by the three researchers and the absence of efforts to minimize them. Milgram and Zimbardo were psychologists and were familiar with the psychological and emotional harm that people can suffer. However, the bias involved in being a researcher, and the curiosity and fascination derived from research (among other feelings) led to a conflict of interest. In the case of Humphreys, this conflict of interest is also manifested and increases the possibility of harm to the participants. He, as a former parish priest and sociologist, was familiar with the abuses and discriminations suffered by the homosexual community, and thus, the harms to which he potentially exposed the people he observed and surveyed. These harms included legal ones since the sexual encounters he recorded were considered illegal at the time. Hence, the need not only for an ethics committee but also in sensitive cases where there may be risks, the advice of independent, ethical experts to conduct audits to ensure that unforeseen or unconsidered harms do not arise. In fact, something of this sort happened, although informally, with the Zimbardo case: Dr. Maslach, less committed to the study, who points out the serious ethical problems, and thanks to her the research is stopped. This type of problem is still valid: the weighing of possible damages is neither simple nor easy, and it also depends on the conscience and humility of the researcher to be prepared to establish limits.

Post-experimental follow-up can be seen as a way to minimize harm. Milgram and Zimbardo did not disengage from those who participated; they followed up on their welfare afterward. Nowadays,

it also includes elements of support, for example, psychological referral (when the studies may reopen old wounds, traumas, or difficult situations)²³.

Closely related to harm is the early termination of research. Ethical guidelines for biomedical research contemplate the possibility of premature termination of research due to the occurrence of severe adverse effects. From today's perspective, there is no doubt that the Zimbardo experiment should have been terminated even earlier: as soon as the manifestations of stress and suffering of the prisoners became apparent.

Conflicts of interest are a central ethical issue from today's perspective. In both the Milgram and Zimbardo research, the principal investigators had specific roles in the experiments: Professor William and the prison superintendent, respectively. Their own interests as researchers came into tension with their roles in the experiments. In the case of Zimbardo, the conflict of interest was also not identified by the Institutional Review Board that evaluated his research³. These cases highlight how a conflict of interest can result in considerable harm to the individuals involved. Moreover, it is interesting to note that it was not an economic interest.

Internal forum or independent evaluation?

When Milgram and Humphreys conducted their research, there were no formal ethical guidelines for the protection of participants. Paradoxically, all three researchers contemplated a number of highly relevant ethical issues. There were some attempts to "make the research described more ethical," as well as later self-critical reflections. In the case of Zimbardo, these guidelines and the emergence of ethics committees were incipient³.

How to implement or regulate ethical issues is still a matter of debate in the social sciences. A question that arises in this context is whether ethical protections should remain merely in the internal forum of the individual researcher or should be regulated externally. Blass, Milgram's historian, reconstructs this perspective:

"Psychologists and other behavioral and social scientists have disagreed about the need for governmental regulations. Milgram himself felt that the "erection of a superstructure of control [by the federal government] on socio-psychological experimentation is a very impressive solution to a non-problem." Today, many social psychologists agree with Milgram and believe that although most biomedical research requires vigilant oversight, social-scientific research generally does not"⁶.

Today, for many social researchers, in line with what Milgram proposed decades ago, it is a "non-problem." According to this perspective, only the particular evaluation of those doing the research is enough. However, ethical failures "sneak in:" inadequate informed consent, unwillingness to terminate the study even when the sadism and suffering involved were explicit, or when the wishes of those who wanted to withdraw from the research were not respected. These cases illustrate how the researcher's internal forum is not sufficient to identify ethical problems in the research itself.

The current debate on the ethical review of the social sciences is very peculiar with respect to its implementation. It is very heterogeneous in different countries and regions. At present, there are no established international ethical guidelines for ethical evaluation as there are for biomedical research.

Among those who question the independent ethical evaluation of social research, two points of view stand out. One is critical of the current functioning of the entire system of ethics committees and regulations that has developed over the last 50 years. The other position is skeptical regarding the very need for ethical evaluation procedures for this kind of research⁸. The former question is that the particular characteristics of social science research projects are not recognized and that they are evaluated using biomedical research as a model. Moreover, although certain exceptions are proposed for the social sciences, it is not easy to apply them. Another difficulty they point out is related to the definition of certain basic notions present in the regulations (research, “research subject,” etc.). Third, they argue that ethics committees mainly evaluate projects coming from the biomedical sciences and their members are not usually familiar with the social disciplines and their methodology. The critique of this perspective is aimed at ethical evaluation as it currently exists and not at ethical evaluation itself. Moreover, they advocate for more careful consideration of social research in the whole system of ethical evaluation and regulation. In many Latin American countries, unlike in Europe, the United States, or Canada, ethical guidelines for social research are incipient, and the ethical review of social research generates much resistance in certain areas in line with what has just been stated.

The second perspective questions the very foundations of the ethical evaluation of social disciplines. While it can be conceded that given the current system of ethical evaluation, social research is “over-regulated,” since the ethical guidelines are modeled on the biomedical sciences, this does not mean that such research does not raise ethical problems.

In our opinion, the internal forum is not enough. An independent evaluation, such as that provided by a research ethics committee, is needed in some of the social sciences research. As noted, these have been criticized, and with good arguments, for not understanding the nature of social science research. Indeed, this is a highly relevant point. Such committees should be prepared and trained to evaluate social science research (as it is very different from biomedical and clinical research) and their lack of knowledge may impede social science’s ability to deliver sound and relevant research. On the other hand, Research Ethics Committees should not merely follow checklists and should avoid a mechanical weighting of ethical requirements. On the contrary, we believe that a considered ethical evaluation should prevail that takes into account the methodological particularities of social research in dialog with existing ethical guidelines. The relevant question that should be asked is what changes are required in the current ethical evaluation so that it recognizes and addresses the particularities of social science research.

Conclusion

The research of Milgram, Humphreys, and Zimbardo became classic cases of social research due to their findings, their public impact, and the ethical controversy of their research process.

Certain research ethics practices, such as informed consent, withdrawal from research, and conflict of interest, have become entrenched, but others continue to be discussed such as deception or covert observation, and others result in highly complex evaluations. This is the case of harms. Although the existence of psychological or emotional harms is recognized in social research (as in biomedical research), estimating them is not simple²⁴. The need for independent evaluation of social research projects is also questioned. In many cases, we find that this is a “non-problem” and, thus, many of the ethical guidelines continue to be experienced as alien to social research and those undertaking it.

What is clear is that the investigator’s internal forum is insufficient. There is a need for independent evaluation as well as careful ethical reflection by ethics committees. Their members must be specially trained to understand and evaluate social science research and its particularities and methodological richness.

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to Timothy Daly for translating this article.

Funding

This research has not received any specific grant from agencies in the public, commercial or for-profit sectors.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Ethical disclosures

Protection of people and animals. The authors declare that no experiments have been carried out on humans or animals for this research.

Data confidentiality. The authors declare that no patient data appear in this article. Furthermore, the authors have recognized and followed the recommendations according to the SAGER guidelines depending on the type and nature of the study.

Right to privacy and informed consent. The authors declare that no patient data appear in this article.

Use of artificial intelligence to generate texts. The authors declare that they have not used any type of generative artificial intelligence in the writing of this manuscript or for the creation of figures, graphs, tables, or their corresponding captions or legends.

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