***Discus Ethical Considerations Related to Research Studies***

Ethical considerations are an integral part of psychological research studies and experiments, ensuring ethically approved treatment for all participants. There are five strict ethical guidelines to be followed and kept in consideration at all times while carrying out a research, for it to be approved and accepted. These guidelines comprise of; prior informed consent of the participants, the protection of participants, confidentiality, the right to withdraw and deception. These must be applied to each research; however, these ethical considerations at times limit the effect or the desired result of a research, often leading psychologists to manipulate certain factors to get around these rules without actually breaking them. Two psychologists have carried out experiments, breaking all grounds of ethical considerations, Zimbardo (1971), looking at conformity and Milgram (1969) looking at obedience.

Prior to any psychological experiment, it is necessary and expected of the researchers to obtain informed consent, whereby the participants should be made aware of the experiment, its aims and their role, in its entirety beforehand, to avoid deception. In Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) regarding rates of conformity, he was successful in correctly advertising the experiment as a study of prison life. He even had each of the participants sign an informed consent contract, which informed the participants of everything that was to take place according to the procedure, and they voluntarily gave their permission for invasion of privacy, loss of civil rights and harassment. However, they were deceived on one aspect, they weren’t told that they would be arrested as prisoners, at home by the local police force, as Zimbardo only received approval from the police force at the very last minute.

Similarly, in Milgram’s shock experiment (1969) testing obedience to authority, his participants were deceived. Milgram failed to acquire informed consent from his participants, as firstly the original advertisement stated that the study was concerned with learning and memory and only once the volunteers were already in the experimental situation, did Milgram mention the involvement of punishment and electric shocks. And yet they didn’t know that the experiment was really testing obedience rates. They were also introduced to Mr. Wallace as another ‘participant’, whereas he was really a confederate, acting to be a participant, who as per the participants was receiving shocks, when he wasn’t really. And since the participants were unaware of all these facts, informed consent was not obtained in its true sense, had the participants known they might not have volunteered to take part.

Taking into account the breach of ethical rules in an experiment, one must consider the extent of the harm caused, caused by misinforming the participants and also how justified was the infringement to the cause of the experiment. In the case of Milgram (1974), he defended himself by claiming to have debriefed his participants thoroughly, in lengthy discussions with each of the participant, immediately after the experiment was over. Giving them a detailed account of the real aim, the procedure and results, along with a follow up questionnaire. The results of which suggested that the participants were indeed very glad to have taken part and that they’re learned something important about themselves. Which Milgram took as his ultimate justification, arguing that if the participants don’t mind then why should anyone else? Asserting the fact that no ethical guidelines were broken, and that to really gain validity and to see the effects of authority on obedience, the participants had to believe they were giving real electric shocks, which couldn’t be done otherwise and the results couldn’t be generalised to real-life situations. Therefore, implying that the lack of informed consent and deception was essential and hence justified.

Another essential ethical guideline that is expected of all psychological researchers to keep in consideration is the protection of participants from harm. This is important for experiments to be carried out successfully and most realistically. This rule was severely violated in Zimbardo’s experiment (1971). Through the experiment the participants faced physical and psychological abuse over several days, causing great distress amongst them. And though they had signed consent forms agreeing to the loss of civil rights and harassment, yet they weren’t prepared for the extreme conditions they were put through as even the researchers were previously unaware of the outcome to be. But looking at the immediate harmful effects of the experiment, it still took them all of 6 days to stop the experiment from proceeding any further, Zimbardo failed to stop it earlier.

In the case of Milgram’s experiment (1969), the participants experienced high levels of distress as they had to give electrical shocks to other participants and in feeling obliged to do so, they underwent psychological harm. Baumrind (1964) accused Milgram of abusing his participants’ rights and feelings, arguing that he failed to protect them adequately from the stress and emotional conflict. Although, Milgram reasoned that infact he was unaware of the outcomes, and was himself surprised by the high obedience rates, noting that the most distressed tended to be most obedient, and as he wasn’t expecting such a high level of obedience he definitely didn’t expect the high levels of distress. But, Milgram did have the authority to stop the research once he saw the adverse effects, but he didn’t do so. Also, the experiment was set up such that it would be hard for participants to disobey, with the added prods by the experimenter to obey, making it hard to withdraw from the experiment.

In accordance with Zimbardo’s experiment (1971), it is perceptible that the distress, mistreatment and degradation suffered by the participants from the prison study wasn’t by any means justified by the practical benefits of it, as suggested by Savin (1973) Nonetheless, as evidenced in the results, this experiment did demonstrate high levels of conformity, which wouldn’t have been possible unless the situation was made to seem life-like and if the experiment was stopped any earlier. In Milgram’s study however, he explained that as soon as the participants stopped giving the shocks, they were met by Mr Wallace and shown that he was completely unharmed and were also assured that the shocks were false. In addition Milgram also conducted extended discussions with the participants to assure them that their behaviour was infact normal, which eased the participants a bit, releasing their stress. Finally, Milgram justifies the ways and means of the experiment as necessary also claiming that at no point were the participants forced to carry out the task, they have their free will and hence have the power to obey or disobey in any situation.

In conclusion, going against any of the set ethical guidelines is a breach of ethical conduct, which could possibly have harmful and detrimental effects on the participants, yet one can see a number of experiments which have broken various ethical rules and though it is not accepted, in certain situations it can most certainly be justified as necessary for obtaining appropriate and valid results depending on the nature of the experimental aim. This is clearly seen in both Zimbardo and Milgram’s experiments, whereby even with the neglection of certain ethical issues, it is accepted.