

# The Monster Study Ethical Issues



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The "Monster Study," conducted in 1939 by Wendell Johnson and his team at the University of Iowa, is one of the most infamous experiments in the history of psychology. This study aimed to explore the effects of positive and negative speech therapy on children who stuttered. However, the methodology and ethical considerations surrounding the research have raised significant concerns, leading to widespread criticism. This article will delve into the various ethical issues associated with the Monster Study, examining its implications on the field of psychology and the ethical standards that have evolved since.

## Background of the Monster Study

In the late 1930s, Wendell Johnson, a speech pathologist, and his graduate student, Mary Tudor, designed the study to examine the impact of different types of speech therapy on children. The study involved 22 orphaned children, half of whom were fluent speakers and the other half who stuttered. The children were divided into two groups: one group received positive reinforcement for their speech, while the other group received negative reinforcement, including harsh criticism and ridicule for their speech imperfections.

## Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of the Monster Study were:

1. To determine whether negative feedback would exacerbate stuttering in children who already had speech difficulties.
2. To explore the potential for positive reinforcement to improve fluency in children who stutter.

While these objectives were framed within a scientific context, the methods employed raised several ethical concerns that continue to resonate in discussions of research ethics today.

# **Ethical Issues Identified**

The ethical issues surrounding the Monster Study can be categorized into several key areas:

## **1. Informed Consent**

One of the most significant ethical violations in the Monster Study was the lack of informed consent. The children involved in the study were orphans, and their guardians were not adequately informed about the nature of the research or its potential risks. Ethical guidelines mandate that participants should fully understand the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits before agreeing to participate. In this case, the children were not given a choice or sufficient information, which raises serious ethical concerns regarding their autonomy and rights as research subjects.

## **2. Psychological Harm**

The negative reinforcement employed in the Monster Study caused psychological distress among the children involved. Many of the children, particularly those who stuttered, experienced increased anxiety and self-doubt as a result of the harsh criticism they received. This intentional infliction of emotional distress is a violation of the ethical principle of "do no harm," which is foundational in psychological research. The long-term psychological impact on these children has been a subject of concern, suggesting that the effects of the study extended beyond its duration.

## **3. Deception and Manipulation**

Deception is another critical ethical issue in the Monster Study. The researchers manipulated the children's experiences without their knowledge or consent, subjecting them to a form of psychological experimentation that they did not understand. While some deception may be ethically permissible in research, particularly when necessary to achieve valid results, it must be justified by the potential benefits of the research. In this case, the manipulation of the children's self-esteem and emotional well-being raises serious ethical questions about the validity of such practices.

## **4. Lack of Debriefing**

Ethical research practices require that participants be debriefed following their involvement in a study, especially if they have been subjected to deception or distressing experiences. The Monster Study did not provide adequate debriefing for the children after the study concluded, leaving them without the necessary support to process their experiences. This lack of follow-up further exacerbated the potential psychological harm inflicted upon the children and reflects a significant oversight in ethical research practices.

# Consequences and Legacy

The Monster Study's ethical violations have had far-reaching consequences for the field of psychology and research ethics as a whole.

## 1. Impact on Participants

The long-term effects of the Monster Study on its participants are difficult to quantify, but there are reports of lasting emotional and psychological issues among those involved. Some participants carried the scars of their experiences into adulthood, with many struggling with issues related to self-esteem and speech. This highlights the ethical responsibility researchers have towards their subjects, particularly vulnerable populations such as children.

## 2. Changes in Ethical Standards

The ethical breaches of the Monster Study contributed to the development of stricter ethical guidelines in psychological research. The American Psychological Association (APA) and other regulatory bodies have since implemented comprehensive guidelines that emphasize the importance of informed consent, minimizing harm, and ensuring the welfare of research participants. These changes have been instrumental in shaping the ethical landscape of psychological research, ensuring that future studies prioritize participant rights and well-being.

# Reflection on Ethical Practices in Research

The Monster Study serves as a cautionary tale about the importance of ethical considerations in research. As the field of psychology continues to evolve, researchers must remain vigilant in adhering to ethical standards that protect the rights and well-being of participants.

## 1. Importance of Ethics Committees

The establishment of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) is one of the most significant advancements in research ethics. These committees review research proposals to ensure that they meet ethical standards and protect participants from harm. The lessons learned from the Monster Study underscore the necessity of rigorous ethical oversight in research involving human subjects.

## 2. Empowering Participants

Researchers must prioritize the autonomy and empowerment of participants. This includes providing clear and comprehensive information about the study, ensuring informed consent, and allowing participants to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Ethical research practices require a

commitment to treating participants with respect and dignity.

### **3. Ongoing Ethical Education**

Ongoing education about ethical practices in research is crucial for researchers, particularly those working with vulnerable populations. Training programs should emphasize the importance of ethical considerations and the potential consequences of unethical behavior. By fostering a culture of ethical awareness, researchers can mitigate the risks of repeating past mistakes.

## **Conclusion**

The Monster Study remains a poignant example of the ethical challenges that can arise in psychological research. Its legacy serves as a reminder of the importance of informed consent, minimizing harm, and upholding the dignity of research participants. As the field of psychology continues to evolve, the lessons learned from the Monster Study must inform future research practices, ensuring that ethical considerations remain at the forefront of scientific inquiry. By prioritizing the rights and well-being of participants, researchers can contribute to a more ethical and compassionate understanding of human behavior.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What was the primary objective of the Monster Study?**

The primary objective of the Monster Study was to investigate the effects of negative speech therapy on children who stutter, specifically to determine if such therapy could cause or exacerbate speech problems.

### **What ethical issues arose from the Monster Study?**

The Monster Study faced several ethical issues, including lack of informed consent from the child subjects and their guardians, the use of psychological harm through negative reinforcement, and the exploitation of vulnerable children.

### **How did the Monster Study violate ethical research standards?**

The Monster Study violated ethical research standards by not obtaining informed consent, failing to ensure the welfare of the child participants, and conducting an experiment that intentionally caused distress and psychological harm.

### **What was the age range of the children involved in the Monster Study?**

The children involved in the Monster Study ranged from 5 to 15 years old, with many being orphans from a home in Davenport, Iowa.

## Who conducted the Monster Study and when?

The Monster Study was conducted in 1939 by Wendell Johnson, a speech pathologist, at the University of Iowa.

## What was the outcome of the Monster Study for the participants?

Many participants suffered long-term psychological effects, including increased anxiety and worsening speech difficulties, due to the negative feedback and labeling they received during the study.

## How has the Monster Study influenced modern ethical standards in research?

The Monster Study has influenced modern ethical standards by emphasizing the importance of informed consent, the need for minimizing harm to participants, and the responsibility of researchers to protect vulnerable populations.

## What lessons can be learned from the Monster Study regarding research ethics?

The lessons learned include the critical importance of ethical oversight, the necessity of prioritizing participant welfare, and the ethical obligation to avoid conducting research that could cause harm or distress.

## What impact did the Monster Study have on public perception of psychological research?

The Monster Study had a negative impact on public perception of psychological research, leading to increased scrutiny and calls for stricter ethical guidelines to prevent similar abuses in the future.

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