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<th><strong>Title of Resource</strong></th>
<th>When Does a Joke Go Too Far?: Understanding the Ethical Implications of Applying Psychology Within and Beyond the Lab</th>
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<td><strong>Brief Description:</strong></td>
<td>This activity helps students engage the ethical issues of vulnerable populations, minimal risk, beneficence, informed consent/minors’ assent. Small groups compare Watson’s Little Albert Experiment with a Pavlovian Prank on the TV show The Office, and a news article regarding hazings/pranks.</td>
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Blog presents the benefits of teaching conditioning theory to high school students with the Office Clip.

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Please paste your resource on the start of the next page. Thanks!

This activity is aimed at helping student engage ethical principles within the contexts of campus life, popular media, and the research lab. This activity builds off of students’ experiential knowledge, leading to their mastery of the definitions and application of the following terms: vulnerable populations, minimal risk, beneficence, informed consent/minors’ assent. Although prior knowledge of classical conditioning theory is not required, it may reduce the length of activity introduction. This activity generally takes a full class period: Introduction of Activity (2-5 min.), The Office Altoid Prank Screening 2x (2 min), Little Albert reading and Screening (15 min.), Small group discussion & handout completion (20 min.), Class Discussion/Review (15 min.), Hazing News article and individual campus policy composition (10 min.).

Three materials are required for this activity:


2)  Media Clips:
Little Albert Experiment: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt0ucxOrPQe
The Office Pavlov/Altoid Experiment: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nE8pFWPSQDM
   Season 3: Episode 16 (Phyllis’ Wedding)
   Based on Pavlov’s Classical Conditioning Theory, Jim offers Dwight an Altoid every time the computer reboots and makes the bell sound. Dwight then becomes conditioned to have a dry mouth when he hears the bell.

3)  Small Group Work Handout: Is Little Albert different than Dwight?
   Students are provided with 5 short-answer questions to discuss and complete as a group. Group work is then submitted for evaluation.

4)  Individual Student Work Handout: When Does a Joke go Too Far?
   This handout introduces the ethical implications of psychological anguish and misapplied theory within the context of campus hazing rituals. Students are provided with Skorton’s (President of Cornell University) 2011 New York Time’s op-ed: A Pledge to Attend Fraternity Hazing. Students are then asked to craft a brief abstract introducing a campus policy that explains the ethical issues involved in hazings/pranks that involve psychological distress. The abstract is submitted for evaluation.

I. Little Albert Reading


The Experiment

As described by Watson and Rayner (1920), an experimental study was undertaken to answer three questions: (1) Can an infant be conditioned to fear an animal that appears simultaneously with a loud, fear-arousing sound? (2) Would such fear transfer to other animals or to inanimate objects? (3) How long would such fears persist? In attempting to answer these questions, Watson and Rayner selected an infant named Albert B., whom they described as “healthy,” and “stolid and unemotional” (p. 1). At approximately 9 months of age, Albert was tested and was judged to show no fear when successively observing a number of live animals (e.g., a rat, a rabbit, a dog, and a monkey), and various inanimate objects (e.g., cotton, human masks, a burning newspaper). He was, however, judged to show fear whenever a long steel bar was unexpectedly struck with a claw hammer just behind his back.

Two months after testing Albert’s apparently unconditioned reactions to various stimuli, Watson and Rayner attempted to condition him to fear a white rat. This was done by presenting a white rat to Albert, followed by a loud clanging sound (of the hammer and steel bar) whenever Albert touched the animal. After seven pairings of the rat and noise (in two sessions, one week apart), Albert reacted with crying and avoidance when the rat was presented without the loud noise.

In order to test the generalization of Albert’s fear response, 5 days later he was presented with the rat, a set of familiar wooden blocks, a rabbit, a short-haired dog, a sealskin coat, a package of white cotton, the heads of Watson and two assistants (inverted so that Albert could touch their hair), and a bearded Santa Claus mask. Albert seemed to show a strong fear response to the rat, the rabbit, the dog, and the sealskin coat; a “negative” response to the mask and Watson’s hair; and a mild response to the cotton. Also, Albert played freely with the wooden blocks and the hair of Watson’s assistants.

After an additional 5 days, Watson reconditioned Albert to the rat (one trial, rat paired with noise) and also attempted to condition Albert directly to fear the previously presented rabbit (one trial) and dog (one trial). When the effects of this procedure were tested in a different, larger room, it was found that Albert showed only a slight reaction to the rat, the dog, and the rabbit. Consequently, Watson attempted “to freshen the reaction to the rat” (p. 9) by presenting it with the loud noise. Soon after this, the dog began to bark loudly at Albert, scaring him and the experimenters and further confounding the experiment.

He allowed the rat to crawl towards him without withdrawing. He sat very still and fixated intently. Rat then touched his hand. Albert withdrew it immediately, then leaned back as far as possible but did not cry. When the rat was placed on his arm he withdrew his body and began to fret, nodding his head. The rat was then allowed to crawl against his chest. He first began to fret and then covered his eyes with both hands. (p. 11)

To answer their third question concerning the permanence of conditioned responses over time, Watson and Rayner conducted a final series of tests on Albert after 31 days of neither conditioning nor extinction trials. In these tests, Albert showed fear when touching the Santa Claus mask, the sealskin coat, the rat, the rabbit, and the dog. At the same time, however, he initiated contact with the coat and the rabbit, showing “strife between withdrawal and the tendency to manipulate” (Watson & Rayner, 1920, p. 10). Following these final tests, Albert’s mother removed him from the hospital where the experiment had been conducted. (According to their own account, Watson and Rayner knew a month in advance the day that Albert would no longer be available to them.)
II. Small Group Work Handout: Is Little Albert different than Dwight?

1. How did you feel when watching the Office Clip? Did you react differently to the Little Albert Experiment? Why or why not?

2. Ethics & Participants: How does the age of the “subject” impact the ethics of their participation? Should there be different standards for experimenting with children and adults? Why or why not?

3. Ethics & Consent: Is it ethical to conduct any type of experiment (i.e., feeding pieces of rat to children) as long as the experiment is explained to the participant (informed) and they agree (consent)? Why or why not?

4. Ethics & Risk: Is it reasonable to require experimenters to guarantee that participants will experience absolutely no harm (i.e., stubbing a toe) during the course of their participation? Describe the types of harm experimenters should be liable for and how they can be avoided.

5. Ethics & Context: Is it ethical to recruit participants to conduct a prank or a punk? When would it be ethical to recruit subjects to participate in a study?
Answers/Discussion:

1. This first question offers students an opportunity to reflect on their initial emotional responses and then unpack the underlying cognitions behind their emotions. Questions 2-5 then help students situate their initial reactions within ethical theory.

2. After drawing on students’ experiential knowledge, the instructor can introduce the concept of vulnerable populations as related to age (Example: Monster Study 1939 induced stuttering in orphan children), disadvantaged groups (Example: Tuskegee Syphilis Study 1934-1972 withholding medical advice to African-Americans with syphilis), prisoners (Example: Nazi medical experiments 1934), and individuals of varying abilities (Example: Willowbrook State School 1956-1971 infected developmentally delayed children with Hepatitis to observe its untreated progression).

3. After reviewing students’ responses the instructor can build a discussion regarding the interaction between age, comprehension, consent, and beneficence. A great case study to reference here is a study by Keith-Spiegel and Maas (1981): 80% of participating children agreed to eat a bite of baked mouse when they were told that it could save children from dying of hunger by the thousands and a majority of children agreed to have their eye poked with a glass rod when the research aims were presented as helping blind children see again. Fortunately, none of these actual experiments were conducted. However, the study highlights the ethical concerns involved with consent and assent.


4. After reviewing students’ responses the instructor can build a discussion around the issue of “minimal risk” (normally associated with daily activities) in contrast to experimentally induced risks.

5. After reviewing students’ responses the instructor can discuss the importance of conducting a risk-benefit analysis and how IRBs determine what constitutes legitimate contributions to the field.
III. Individual Student Work Handout: When Does a Joke go Too Far?

Every year, students on college campuses die from hazing rituals involving psychological and physiological risk. Though Dwight’s dry mouth may have soon been extinguished, others may be traumatized or physically harmed from conditioning pranks involving electrocution, fear, or dangerous stimuli such as poisonous snakes. Although campuses are required to establish Institutional Review Boards to ensure ethical standards for researchers, campuses are not federally obligated to develop hazing guidelines.

What would you do if you were Chancellor or President of your University to ensure that students on your campus were only exposed to minimal harm, whatever the setting?

Individual Activity: Craft a brief abstract introducing a campus policy that explains the ethical issues involved in hazings/pranks that result in psychological and physical harm. Be sure to explain your reasoning behind the policy as well as how the policy will be enforced.

A Pledge to End Fraternity Hazing: By DAVID J. SKORTON  Ithaca, N.Y.

IN February, a 19-year-old Cornell sophomore died in a fraternity house while participating in a hazing episode that included mock kidnapping, ritualized humiliation and coerced drinking. While the case is still in the courts, the fraternity chapter has been disbanded and those indicted in connection with the death are no longer enrolled here.

This tragedy convinced me that it was time — long past time — to remedy practices of the fraternity system that continue to foster hazing, which has persisted at Cornell, as on college campuses across the country, in violation of state law and university policy.

Yesterday, I directed student leaders of Cornell’s Greek chapters to develop a system of member recruitment and initiation that does not involve “pledging” — the performance of demeaning or dangerous acts as a condition of membership. While fraternity and sorority chapters will be invited to suggest alternatives for inducting new members, I will not approve proposals that directly or indirectly encourage hazing and other risky behavior. National fraternities and sororities should end pledging across all campuses; Cornell students can help lead the way.

Why not ban fraternities and sororities altogether, as some universities have done? Over a quarter of Cornell undergraduates (3,822 of 13,935 students) are involved in fraternities or sororities. The Greek system is part of our university’s history and culture, and we should maintain it because at its best, it can foster friendship, community service and leadership.

Hazing has been formally prohibited at Cornell since 1980 and a crime under New York State law since 1983. But it continues under the guise of pledging, often perpetuated through traditions handed down over generations. Although pledging is explained away as a period of time during which pre-initiates (“pledges”) devote themselves to learning the information necessary to become full members, in reality, it is often the vehicle for demeaning activities that cause psychological harm and physical danger.
About 2,000 alcohol-related deaths occur each year among American college students. Alcohol or drug abuse is a factor in more than a half-million injuries each year — and also in sexual and other assaults, unsafe sex, poor academic performance and many other problems.

At Cornell, high-risk drinking and drug use are two to three times more prevalent among fraternity and sorority members than elsewhere in the student population. During the last 10 years, nearly 60 percent of fraternity and sorority chapters on our campus have been found responsible for activities that are considered hazing under the Cornell code of conduct.

Why would bright young people subject themselves to dangerous humiliation? Multiple factors are at play: the need of emerging adults to separate from family, forge their own identities and be accepted in a group; obedience to authority (in this case, older students); the ineffectiveness of laws and other constraints on group behavior; and organizational traditions that perpetuate hazardous activities.

Alcohol makes it easier for members to subject recruits to physical and mental abuse without feeling remorse and to excuse bad behavior on the grounds of intoxication. It provides a social lubricant, but it impairs the judgment of those being hazed and lowers their ability to resist.

Even more distressing, although 55 percent of college students involved in clubs, teams and organizations experience hazing, the vast majority of them do not identify the events as hazing. Of those who do, 95 percent do not report the events to campus officials.

Doctors, nurses and other student-health professionals have tried to address high-risk drinking and hazing through individual counseling, a medical amnesty process that reduces barriers to calling for help in alcohol emergencies, and educational programs. But the problem has persisted.

There are signs of progress. Jim Yong Kim, president of Dartmouth, has helped organize a multi-campus approach to identifying the most effective strategies against high-risk drinking. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has established a college presidents’ advisory group to develop and share approaches to this problem.

There is a pressing need for better ways to bring students together in socially productive, enjoyable and memorable ways. At Cornell, acceptable alternatives to the pledge process must be completely free of personal degradation, disrespect or harassment in any form. One example is Sigma Phi Epsilon’s “Balanced Man Program,” which replaces the traditional pledging period with a continuing emphasis on community service and personal development.

We need to face the facts about the role of fraternities and sororities in hazing and high-risk drinking. Pledging — and the humiliation and bullying that go with it — can no longer be the price of entry.

David J. Skorton, a cardiologist, is the president of Cornell University.