

Little Albert: Ethics and Pragmatics

Christopher Crawford, CPhT

Abstract

The modern quest to uncover the historical outcome of Watson's Little Albert is scrutinized through a pragmatic lens and found to be of nominal scientific worth. The Douglass Merritte hypothesis and the Albert Barger hypothesis both have strong supporting evidence, but key flaws in their positions exist which cannot withstand pure scientific rigor. If the identity of Little Albert cannot be proven with absolute certainty, then the only field in which this study has any substantive worth is in the field of scientific ethics. This study is helpful in illuminating the contextual nature of scientific ethics. It serves as a historical tether emphasizing the ethical evolution of the field of psychology and as a cautionary tale that articulates the importance of tempering scientific inquiry with ethical questions.

Keywords: Little Albert, Ethics, Watson, Douglass Merritte, Albert Barger

In 1920 John B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner published a study wherein the authors claimed to have experimentally conditioned a phobia of furry creatures in a baby boy referred to as "Little Albert" (Watson & Rayner, 1920). Once a fundamental study in the history of behaviorism, this experiment is now notorious for its poor scientific validity (Samelson, 1980), its questionable ethics (Harris, 1979), and the resultant ambiguity concerning both the participant's identity and his life after the experiment. In modern times scholarly debates are ongoing concerning Little Albert's true identity, and the pragmatic worth of such inquiry. Of the latter argument the consensus that arises from this scholarly dialogue seems to

contend that the story of Little Albert best functions to describe (through contrast) the evolution of ethics in psychology (Harris, 1979). However, no argument has been made to settle either debate. By analyzing these debates through the pragmatic values of the American zeitgeist one side is clearly favored: it matters less what came of Little Albert. What is important is the progress of the discipline, ethically and otherwise, as psychologists learn from Watson's mistakes.

In the early 1900's John B. Watson began behaviorism as a new discipline which sought to progress the field of psychology from a pure (collecting data for its own sake) to an applied science (wherein science was applied to the problems of everyday life) (Shultz & Shultz, 2011). Little Albert represents in psychology an origin myth by which John B. Watson attempted to legitimize behaviorism, and vicariously psychology as a whole, in the minds of the American populous by demonstrably solving social problems (O'Donnell, 1985). Origin studies, such as the Little Albert study, are examined in modern times through a "justificationist" or "revisionist" lens as a means to respectively "justify" modern practices or "revise" perceptions of the past (Finison, 1983). In so doing these analysis function as a means to historically root antecedents and draw from them a direct line of lineage to modern trends. Accordingly, the benchmark Little Albert study resurfaces periodically in various permutations, replete with idiosyncratic differences cultivated to modern issues (Harris, 2011). While these studies are inextricable from the establishment of new theory in the social sciences, they (as with most primary texts) are scarcely studied by psychologists in academia (Finison, 1983). Thus, the way in which the tale of Little Albert is told shapes perceptually the evolution of psychology as a whole, and is inextricably related to the modern inquiry into his identity.

Review and Summary of Modern Theories

Little Albert was defined by little more than his name in the original study from Watson and Rayner. In the study the authors

described his rearing (having occurred almost exclusively in a hospital environment), physical attributes (well developed and healthy), and they described his emotional stability (above average as actualized by his stoic demeanor) (Watson, & Rayner, 1920). However, no demographic or descriptive information regarding Little Albert outside of the context of the information pertinent to the experiment is present in the original study. Given that this was not a longitudinal study, Watson made no documented effort to observe Little Albert in later life. Also, according to Buckley, Watson burned all of his notes in the time before his death further complicating the search for Little Albert's true identity (as cited in Beck, Levinson, & Irons, 2009). Thus, very little verifiable information about Little Albert exists (Powell, Digdon, Harris, & Smithson, 2014).

Though the search for Little Albert has been hindered by the absence of concrete facts, two groups of researchers have reached probable conclusions about Little Albert's true identity. One group comprised of Hall P. Beck, Sharman Levinson, and Gary Irons have reached the conclusion that Little Albert was actually Douglas Merritte (2009). However, scholars have published multiple papers highlighting a preponderance of errors made by the aforementioned researchers in both their methodology, and their process of formulating the inferences which lead to their conclusion (Reese, 2010; Powell, 2010; Digdon, Powell, & Smithson, 2014; Powell, Digdon, Harris, & Smithson, 2014). The foundational claim made to support the Douglas Merritte hypothesis is based on diagnosing Little Albert as functionally impaired solely using Watson's original film clips from the experiment (Beck, Levinson, & Irons, 2009). Accordingly, most critiques of this study center on the validity of this methodological approach (Powell, 2010; Digdon, Powell, & Smithson, 2014; Digdon, Powell, & Harris, 2014). A more recent team of researchers consisting of Russell A. Powell, Nancy Digdon, Ben Harris, and Christopher Smithson came to the conclusion that Little Albert was in fact Albert Barger (2014). This group of researchers is comprised of some

of the most prolific authors of critical reviews of the Douglas Merritte hypothesis. In their research they use their scrutiny of the Douglas Merritte hypothesis to further defend their thesis (Powell, Digdon, Harris, & Smithson, 2014). Currently no papers have been published criticizing the Albert Barger hypothesis, however this may simply be a result of how recent this hypothesis has been proposed. This does not imply that their inferences were valid, or that their conclusion is widely accepted.

Pragmatics

Whether or not the Albert Barger hypothesis or the Douglas Merritte hypothesis is correct is of little substantive worth to analysis of the validity of Watson and Rayner's experiment as each of these hypothesized participants are now dead (Powell, Digdon, Harris, & Smithson, 2014; Beck, Levinson, & Irons, 2009). Therefore, without being able to interview Little Albert in order to assess his perception of the experiment's influence on his later life (which would be subject to its own questions of validity and reliability), formulating a hypothesis of a causal link between Watson and Rayner's experiment and second-hand information about Little Albert's later outcomes would be equal parts conjecture and supposition. Making causal claims from this experiment is further complicated by the numerous flaws present in Watson and Rayner's experimental design, their poor data collection technique, and the fact that Little Albert's life after the experiment is completely undocumented (based both on the ambiguity surrounding his identity, and the lack of documentation from the original experimenters) (Harris, 1979; Beck, Levinson, & Irons, 2009). Thus, the utility of the modern research is undermined by the original research itself, and any attempt to synthesize information from the original research (outside of the sphere of ethics) is similarly self-defeating.

In the realm of ethics, however, this research is unparalleled in fruitfulness. In modern times the story of Little Albert resurges periodically (primarily in every introductory psychology textbook), re-

examined under the modern ethical context to articulate the strictures and precepts of the current ethical climate (Harris, 1979). Thus practically speaking, the experiment serves as an ethical anchor; the distance from which serves to articulate the evolution of psychological ethics, which in contrast serves to illuminate and define the ethical climate present during the time of examination. Harris proposes that each new analysis interprets the study through a unique and modern theoretical lens (1979). Church contends that this particular style of analysis necessarily skews and manipulates the data of the original experiment to favor whatever modern argument is being made, as opposed to representing an objective analysis (1980). Combining these sensibilities yields an idea echoed in the practice of historical revisionism. Historical revisionism occurs when comparisons are made between historical and modern times, defined as being “emotionally satisfying but misleading...props to justify current political stances” (Heilbrun, 2014, pg. 6). Hence, interpreting the Little Albert study through a modern contextual lens results in an illumination of modernity which is of more pragmatic value than any claim to truth innate in the original research (Harris, 1980).

Little Albert has thus become a figure of psychological folklore: obscured by myth and inference, in lieu of factual knowledge (Harris, 1980). In this way Little Albert is not dissimilar to another famous psychological folklore hero Phineas Gage, renowned for having survived having a metal rod travel completely through his brain (Kean, 2011). The story of Phineas Gage predates the story of Little Albert by nearly a century, and similarly it lacks much accurate and valid documentation; this has resulted in various permutations of retellings in the time since the occurrence of the incident (Kean, 2011). Where once Phineas Gage represented in science a unique case study documenting a wealth of information on the then unknown field of neuroscience, the information that could be gleaned from his story has all since been acquired (Kean, 2011). An analogous parallel may be inferred in the way science has similarly moved beyond the practical implications of the study of Little

Albert. The data does not appear to exist which would satisfy the rigors of factuality for any new claims made to supplement the knowledge of this study in the history of psychology.

Ethics

To rearticulate the aforementioned proposition: there is little to gain scientifically in the quest for little Albert, however, the experiment is invaluable in the field of scientific ethics. In this field Oppenheimer serves as an archetype for ethical responsibility in science, as he bore the ethical burden of releasing the hydrogen bomb to humanity; a technology described in his eulogy as “a power over nature out of all proportion to their (human-kinds) moral strength” (Nelson, 2014, p. 257). He struggled for a time to weigh the virtue of the gains of unhindered scientific progress contrasted with what humanity could potentially lose morally and ethically in the process (Ambrosio, 2009). This dilemma is still relevant in modern times, and underpins the value of a broad discipline-spanning ethical manual such as that propagated by the American Psychological Association. With the existence of an ethical field manual, no singular individual bears the brunt of ethical responsibility, but it is instead a communal task to which all psychologists are responsible individually and as a part of the entire psychological community. Watson conducted his experiments without the luxury of a field-spanning ethical code, and as such he is solely responsible for his questionable ethics. From his example and other examples, the APA’s ethical guidelines have adapted and evolved, as apparent in the numerous published versions of the APA field manual that have been made (Leach, 2012; APA, 2002).

Given that no papers expressing ethical concern were published in response to Watson and Rayner’s study, and that their experimental procedures were emulated by later psychologists, one cannot reasonably infer that this experiment was considered unethical by the scientific community of the 1920’s (Digdon, Powell, & Harris, 2014). The example of Watson and Rayner’s Little Albert experiment exemplifies the concept

that ethics are historically and situationally rooted (Kuhn, 1964). To recapitulate the plight of Oppenheimer; experimental ethics in modernity are a calculus of human loss as related to scientific gains (Ambrosio, 2009). Though the aforementioned conflict is addressed by a universal ethical code, this temporary resolution does not go so far as to imply that ethical considerations are ever ultimately resolved. Accordingly, ethics in science should be periodically re-assessed in order to stay relevant to the advancements of science and humanity (Leach, 2012).

Moving Forward

As psychology has evolved and championed the strictures of scientific rigor it has made great strides to establish itself an equal among the “hard” sciences, which by definition are already methodologically rigorous, objective, and precise (Shultz & Shultz, 2011). However, the pragmatic core of modern science with its component strictures of validity and reliability represent an incommensurable language from that of the Little Albert inquiry (Harris, 2011). As there is no extent proof of Little Albert’s identity, the accuracy of any claim cannot meet the requirements of scientific validity and reliability. Thus, the search for Little Albert epitomizes an argument made against psychology’s attempt to solidify itself as a science; namely that psychology deals in subject matter which cannot be scientifically proven (Shultz & Shultz, 2011). While the Little Albert story still has pragmatic worth as an ethical tent-pole and a historical curiosity, the search for Little Albert does not. To be embraced among the other hard sciences (such as physics, chemistry, and biology) psychology must embrace the same language and strictures which guide them, and resultantly abandon some inquiries for which the rigors of hard science cannot be met.

The central tenant of the code of ethics from the American Psychological Association is to “do no harm” (2010, pg. 3). From this foundation evolves the idea that it is the responsibility of every psychologist to ensure that the field progresses ethically to this end.

This goal is aided by the illuminating understanding of past mistakes made in the pursuit of scientific knowledge (Harris, 1980). Science has gained all that can be gained from the study of Little Albert, and given the improbability of the surfacing of any valid knowledge of the child's later outcomes, it is time to move beyond the inferential and conjectural question of who Little Albert was (Harris, 1979). The focus should instead be on what Little Albert represents: an origin myth and a historical tether inextricable from the study of the evolution of ethics in the field of psychology (Harris, 2011). The illuminating quality intrinsic to knowledge of the field's past mistakes ensures that advancement of the discipline will not be offset by what humanity loses ethically in the struggle towards scientific progress.

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Christopher Crawford is a senior and will be graduating with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Psychology. This paper was written for Dr. Catherine Borshuk's P459 History and Systems of Psychology course.