**Psychologists for Social Responsibility**

**Call for Transparency and Accountability Regarding the Neubauer Twin and Triplet Studies**

Recent documentaries and associated news reports have drawn renewed attention to the fact that powerful organizations and institutions involved in a longitudinal twin and triplet study, begun by child psychologist Peter Neubauer in the 1960s, have refused to be fully transparent about their methods, participants and results. Though releasing some of the study material in publications and to participants affected by the study, the information released is far from complete[[1]](#endnote-1). This lack of full transparency is particularly disturbing since the Neubauer study unethically separated adopted identical twins and triplets at birth without their adopted parents’ knowledge or consent, assigned them to different parenting styles, and secretly observed them throughout their lives. Neubauer’s experiment took place with the assistance of the now-closed Louise Wise adoption agency (whose records are now handled by Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children[[2]](#endnote-2)), and the Manhattan Child Development Center (which has since become “the largest human services agency in the state of New York”[[3]](#endnote-3)). The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) at the time provided some of the study’s funding[[4]](#endnote-4). Some of the known survivors of this experiment were depicted in the 2017 and 2018 documentary films, *The Twinning Reaction* and *Three Identical Strangers*. These individuals discovered their other siblings accidentally or through the careful research of outsiders to the study, and only later discovered that their life circumstances were charted with scientific research goals in mind.

According to these documentaries, many of the separated children suffered mental health issues in adolescence and as adults. The director, Lori Shineski, of the *Twinning Reaction* documentary, told ABC’s 20/20 that, of the known 15 children that Neubauer’s study separated at birth, three have committed suicide[[5]](#endnote-5). Although 15 participants is a small sample, a suicide rate of 20% is disturbingly high. Given that about 2% of Americans who die each year do so by suicide[[6]](#endnote-6), and adoptees attempt suicide at 4 times the rate of the non-adopted population[[7]](#endnote-7), an expected lifetime suicide rate, even among adoptees, should not be as high as 20%. And as long as study participants still live, 20% is the lower limit of deaths attributable to suicide in the sample.

Moreover there is also anecdotal evidence that Neubauer’s experiment played a causal role in the suicides of the Louise Wise agency adoptees. The infant “subjects” of this experiment were intentionally assigned to adoptive parents with different class backgrounds and parenting styles. One adoptee featured in *Three Identical Strangers*, Eddy Galland, who died by suicide, had been assigned to a particularly punitive disciplinarian ill-suited to Eddy’s freewheeling personality[[8]](#endnote-8).

So what kind of discipline is appropriate for those institutions associated with the Neubauer study? As Psychologists for Social Responsibility, we do not consider punitive action the only appropriate form of accountability. The most important priority is to help mitigate the possibility of further suicides among the study’s survivors—many of whom are still unknown to themselves and each other. Thus some number of “subjects” remain who would be shocked to discover they have identical siblings and that their lives were an experiment funded and overseen by the powerful. Serendipitous discovery of this ugly fact, a likely factor in the “depression that descended after they [the triplets] discovered that their years apart had not been an accident”[[9]](#endnote-9) is likely worse than learning it as a result of institutional accountability.

We believe the most effective way to prevent further tragedies is for the victims of the study to obtain not only a few words of apology[[10]](#endnote-10) and restricted redacted access to some study documents, but genuine restorative justice, including full transparency, meaningful dialogue, and unredacted answers to their questions about Neubauer’s research. We nevertheless note that too often the scales of American justice are heavily weighted by privileging factors like class, race and power. The result is typically excessive, abusive and sometimes lethal punishment for those with little wealth or power—often railroaded into confessions for crimes they many not have committed—while offenders with wealth and power receive exceptionally lenient judgments, non-punitive reprimands or no legal entanglement at all. If the scales of US justice are to edge towards balance, the powerful and wealthy institutions who enabled Neubauer’s twin and triplet experiments must be held accountable in a meaningful way. Restorative justice would count, arguably, as a light treatment (though both humane and effective), but the institutions involved are resisting even this gentle form of accountability[[11]](#endnote-11).

At a minimum, the affected twins and triplets and their families should have access to the full details of the study that so dramatically affected their lives. Currently the records are sealed at Yale University library until 2065. The likelihood that these records will contain evidence relevant to Nuremberg Code-violating human experimentation should be a compelling reason to unseal them, and make it unnecessary for the affected twins and triplets to file a class action lawsuit to obtain this information.

Resisting this logic, Yale has expressed a concern that we consider morally troubling: that unsealing the research might lead to legal action by the much more powerful organization that sealed the information in the first place; moreover other similar institutions might also be reluctant to pay Yale to seal their records there in the future[[12]](#endnote-12). Yale thus seems unmoved by the compelling evidence that the records contain important information about Nuremberg Code-violating human experimentation. Psychologists for Social Responsibility believes that transparency, while the survivors of the abuse still live, is the most ethical path, even if not the most financially expedient one.

It is critical that researchers who conducted the study, and representatives of the institutions who sponsored or funded it, sit face-to-face with the survivors and the families of the dead. They should hear their pain and find a way to express genuine contrition, remorse and responsibility, not only privately to a select number of survivors, but publicly and for the record. Additionally, reparations commensurate with the suffering of the individuals and the families would be appropriate.

Some media sources have tacitly excused Neubauer and fellow researchers as products of a different historical moral environment[[13]](#endnote-13). In addition, Tim Wardle, director of *Three Identical Strangers,* has acknowledged that Neubauer’s research began during a time marked by experiments that are now ethically impossible to conduct, like Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram’s Obedience study11. These latter studies, notably, also received funding and support from powerful US government institutions[[14]](#endnote-14),[[15]](#endnote-15). But the Prison and Obedience studies at least provided some kind of informed consent, debriefing, disclosure and follow-up with the affected participants. And transparency of reporting allowed prominent researchers to call out the ethical problems with these studies as soon as they learned about them, not decades later.

In contrast to the Zimbardo’s and Milgram’s studies, Neubauer and his institutional collaborators fully concealed their methods and results, preventing timely criticism. Without this concealment, it is likely that the moral climate of the time would have been no friendlier to Neubauer’s study than it was to the Prison and Obedience studies. Neubauer’s study took place after the international embrace of the Nuremberg code and the Declaration of Helsinki[[16]](#endnote-16), and so many, though clearly not all, researchers in psychology and across the health professions were sensitive to violations of these principles.

In the era of the passionate and morally ambitious Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, it is unlikely that there would have been no voiced objection to researchers secretly separating infants, resolving to never inform either them or their guardians of that separation, and then secretly monitoring them throughout their sometimes suicide-ended lives. Indeed, Neubauer’s concealment seems to reflect a fear of the ethical norms of his time. This fear may also have motivated Neubauer’s decision, before his death in 2007, to seal the results at Yale until 2065. Also, while an unintended but beneficial consequence of the Prison and Obedience studies was the spurring of stronger protections for research participants, Neubauer’s twin separation study has brought no such benefits, only harm.

Though Neubauer himself is deceased, the living stewards of the institutions associated with his twin and triplet study are still in a position to make things right. Their decision to honor Neubauer’s concern for secrecy rather than the rights of the victims shields the involved institutions from accountability. This decision also exposes the still unknown “subjects” of the experiment to the worst possible way of discovering a key facet of their life stories. This is a grave injustice to the study’s survivors and the families of the dead. It is also contrary to legitimate scientific and ethical norms designed to sustain the trust and well-being of research participants. If these institutions—and, more broadly, the profession of psychology—continue to allow this information to remain hidden, this also endangers the ability of psychological science to prevent such abuses from occurring again in the future. We call on other professional organizations of psychologists to speak up in support of the rights of victims of this study to appropriate transparency and restorative justice.

**Why Psychologists for Social Responsibility is addressing this issue**

Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) has long opposed the use of psychology for human rights abuses and human experimentation in violation of the Nuremberg Code. We are deeply concerned about researchers and clinicians who commit such abuses with impunity, and the ways in which structures of power encourage and condone the abuses.

PsySR has, in recent years, become known for our actions against US government-commanded and psychologist-assisted torture[[17]](#endnote-17). In coordination with other movements and organizations like Psychologists for an Ethical APA and the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology, PsySR has taken a particularly firm and consistent stance against abusive and destructive uses of psychology by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense. A network of allies, many PsySR members among them, also work together to guard against undue influence by the CIA and DoD in the affairs of the psychology profession[[18]](#endnote-18). But the CIA and DoD are not the only large institutions that habitually run roughshod over psychological ethics for what they see to be worthy or lucrative goals.

We have observed that psychologists, psychiatrists, or other mental health care professionals are vulnerable to accountability when they act as independent agents[[19]](#endnote-19), but those connected to deep centers of power have often been insulated by those powers closing their ranks[[20]](#endnote-20). The ability of power to shield itself from accountability leaves no recourse to the vulnerable individuals whose lives have been harmed or destroyed by powerful individuals and forces. And if the harmed or destroyed belong to a group with comparatively little power, like foreign nationals, people of color, ethnic minorities, or adoptees born to working class mothers, the insulation of the powerful culprits from accountability is that much easier.

This kind of insulation can precipitate a system-level failure that, if left unchecked, continues to perpetuate itself. Removing the teeth from institutions of accountability allows abuses to continue over time, and allows cultures of abuse to gain institutional momentum and entrenchment[[21]](#endnote-21). In the case of the Neubauer experiment, and in all cases of human rights abuses under the cover of science, accountability is key to restoring and maintaining rights-respecting ethical norms and sound scientific practice.

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