

Nazi Experimentation on Children and Its Effects on Research Ethics

Introduction

Medical experiments conducted on children in National Socialist Germany and other occupied territories during World War II were among the most horrifically unethical in the history of research. These experiments, which usually took place in concentration camps, formed part of a larger programme of trials inflicted on unwilling prisoners and other vulnerable disenfranchised groups, including children. The 'researchers' were distinguished university doctors who were lauded by the contemporary medical profession and who often lectured in the most prestigious universities and research institutes.

A direct link exists between this experimentation and current childcare research practice in third-level educational institutions internationally and in Ireland. The reasons that undergraduate and postgraduate students of childcare must perform the often arduous task of obtaining ethical approval from university ethics committees before beginning research involving children may be traced back directly to these events.

To highlight the depravity of this immoral and unethical behaviour, and to show the extent to which research regulation was required after the war, this article examines briefly some of the reasons the tests were carried out and outlines the various categories of experiment. It then explores various attempts to introduce and define regulation of the research profession after WWII.

Nazi experimentation

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Vincent O'Connor

Technological University of the Shannon

A direct link exists between the experimentation carried out on children and other vulnerable groups in Nazi Germany and current research practice internationally, including in Ireland. This article outlines the emergence of research codes of ethics in the wake of the Nuremberg trials that took place after World War II.

foremost among them the Jews, would weaken the genetic strength of the Aryans and ultimately lead to their demise, if they were allowed to continue to interbreed with the racially pure Germans. Inferior races, the Nazis believed, were therefore *lebensunwürdig* – unworthy of life – and should be destroyed. Rather than murder the children of these races, the Nazis often deemed it more appropriate to use them to further medical research and, as they claimed, expand knowledge of genetics, heredity, racial distinctions, resistance to disease, survival of extreme conditions, and population control, among other things.

The experiments carried out on children included freezing, where children were placed in ice water or subjected to extremely cold temperatures to investigate how long they could survive before death. In others, children were intentionally contaminated with malaria and typhus to explore the effectiveness of new medications, inoculations, and treatments. Children were administered toxic substances such as poison gas, or injected with toxins, to determine levels of lethal dosage. To test the effectiveness of new methods of population control, toddlers were often subjected to sterilisation.

In Auschwitz concentration camp in 1943–1944, Dr Josef Mengele conducted experiments on twins and other children. He injected them with harmful chemicals and intentionally infected them with potentially fatal diseases. In Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp in 1942–1943, Dr August Hirt conducted experiments on Jewish and Romani children to collect racial data and create anatomical specimens for Nazi propaganda campaigns. In Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944, Dr Kurt Heissmeyer conducted experiments on 20 Jewish children to test the effectiveness of a new and ultimately useless tuberculosis vaccine. These are just a few examples of Nazi experimentation on children and other human subjects. The full extent is not known, as many of the records were destroyed by the Nazis before the end of the war.

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Codes and guidelines

The experiments on children in particular represented a gross violation of human rights and a complete disregard for the wellbeing and dignity of these young, vulnerable individuals. Many subjects died, and those who were fortunate enough to survive suffered greatly with lifelong health problems. Many of the Nazi doctors and researchers who conducted the experiments were later put on trial for war crimes. An important legacy of these experiments is that they perhaps serve to mark the importance of adopting ethical research practices and the need to protect the rights and welfare of all research participants, particularly children.

In November 1945, France, the Soviet Union, the UK, and the US established the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg to prosecute the principal Nazi war criminals. It presided over a collective trial of senior Nazis for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Several sets of trials were conducted, including trials of major war criminals, principal Nazi judges, leaders of various war ministries, and Nazi doctors. The trial of Nazi doctors concentrated on the medical professionals who conducted inhumane experiments on concentration camp inmates, including children.

When the extent of the depravity was revealed, a subcommittee of physicians, lawyers, and judges involved in the trials was appointed to establish a code of ethics to regulate all future research on human beings, particularly medical research. The Nuremberg Code was thus intended to prevent such atrocities from happening again.

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The Code consists of 10 principles, from which subsequent ethical guidelines for research on human subjects were to be derived.¹ It refers specifically to medical experimentation but was gradually accepted worldwide as a foundation document in all disciplines. The principles include the necessity for researchers to:

- » obtain informed consent
- » design research whose results will prove beneficial to society in general
- » avoid all unnecessary physical or mental harm to participants
- » avoid any chance of death or injury
- » ensure that the degree of risk to participants is outweighed by the likely benefits of the research
- » prepare properly to produce a safe environment for participants
- » be qualified to conduct the research
- » inform the participants that they may call a halt to the research at any time.

Since 1947, other milestones in research ethics have been reached. The brevity of this article prevents anything other than a cursory mention of some major ones. The Declaration of Helsinki incorporated and expanded on the ethical principles of the Nuremberg Code and was adopted by the World Medical Association in 1964. It provided more detailed and comprehensive guidance for conducting research, and it has been revised several times. The most recent version was adopted in 2013.

In 1979, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in the US released the Belmont Report. It proposed a more nuanced set of ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research, emphasising respect for persons,

1. The Nuremberg Code can be read at the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nuremberg-code>

beneficence, and justice. In 1991, the US federal government implemented the Common Rule, which outlines the ethical principles and regulatory requirements for research involving human subjects. The Common Rule has been revised several times, with the most recent version being released in 2018.

Ethical research in Ireland

Recognition of the need for independent ethics review of research involving human subjects grew in the 1960s and 1970s. Most universities and research institutions now have ethics review committees to review research proposals and apply ethical standards. In Ireland, the Health Research Regulations 2018 govern the ethical rules for research involving humans. They aim to ensure that research is conducted in an ethical manner that respects the rights and welfare of participants. Some of the key ethical rules for research in Ireland include:

- » informed consent
- » confidentiality
- » submission of proposal to an ethics committee for review
- » inclusion of risk–benefit analysis
- » protection of data
- » protection of the rights of vulnerable groups such as children
- » reporting of adverse events.

The underlying principle of all milestones in ethical research regulation is identical to that contained in the Nuremberg Code: protection of the rights of all participants.

Childcare research students often assume that a repetition of barbaric experimentation on children is now impossible, due to the existence and pervasiveness of ethical regulation. This, of course, is untrue. Before the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 – in the land of such great liberal intellectuals as Bonhoeffer, Goethe, Schiller, and Von Humboldt – such grotesque abuse and flagrant disrespect of children’s rights was unheard of and forbidden. Laws and regulations are only as good as the people charged with the responsibility of writing, enforcing, and upholding them. It is therefore incumbent on all liberal thinkers to ensure that the people they elect to make and interpret the law have a fundamental respect for the rights of children.

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