Bathroom Behavior and Human Dignity

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A 1976 article by Middlemist, Knowles, and Matter that appeared in this Journal reported on a study of urinating behavior observed surreptitiously in a men's lavatory. Questions regarding the ethical propriety of the study are raised, along with questions about the role journals play in calling attention to ethical issues or problems in psychological research.

A recent article by Middlemist, Knowles, and Matter (1976) reported on a field experiment in a men's lavatory. Men who entered a “three-urinal lavatory” at a midwestern U.S. university were subjected to one of three conditions: The unknowing subjects either urinated “alone,” directly adjacent to a confederate of the experimenter, or into one urinal at a distance removed from a confederate. Another researcher observed this behavior from a toilet stall via a periscope apparatus while using a stopwatch to record the “delay and persistence of micturation” (p. 543). The findings were analyzed and interpreted as offering objective evidence that invasions of personal space may produce physiological changes associated with physical arousal.

The conduct of this research and the publication of it in a major journal raise significant questions about the current state of human dignity as determined by psychological researchers. Although freedom of scientific inquiry and the freedom of the press are supremely important, the judgment of both experimenters and journal editors in this case seems worthy of careful discussion.

Disguised field experiments in public situations have long been considered important areas of inquiry, but they are also subject to important ethical considerations (see APA, 1973). The ethical principles adopted by APA make note of the narrow boundary between drawing on everyday experiences and spying. The APA (1973) guidelines clearly state: “The ethical investigator will assume responsibility for undertaking a study employing covert investigation in private situations only after very careful consideration and consultations” (p. 32). The same guidelines stress the importance of maintaining the human dignity of subjects and carefully weighing the costs of the experiment against the anticipated benefits both to the individual subject and to society at large.

Middlemist and his colleagues (1976, p. 544) describe in great detail their selection of a timing device, a periscope apparatus, urinal measurements (complete with metric data), and even the “flushing” arrangements. It is ironic that they use virtually no space in the article discussing the cost versus benefit rationale or otherwise attempting to explain how the projected importance of their research justifies the invasion of their subjects’ privacy. Although they note that close interpersonal distance resulted in “micturation delay” and a shortened duration of urination, they do not address the issue of possible discomfort to the subjects nor the reason that this was seemingly thought to be insignificant. Although the subjects were never informed that they had participated in an experiment, the experimenters also seemed oblivious to the potential harm to unsuspecting or unstable individuals who might accidentally discover that they were being observed during the course of the “micturation,” or shortly thereafter. At the very least, the design seems laughable and trivial. On the other hand, there appear to be serious ethical questions and potential hazards that are not fully addressed.

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If we presume that the investigators did indeed use careful thought and had good justification to expect important scientific gains from their project, one must ask why this was not deemed worthy of at least as much space in the article as descriptions of the urinals and periscope. Though one could claim that a college lavatory is a public place, it is a non sequitur to suggest that one does not expect a degree of privacy there. It is incumbent on the investigator(s) to make the cost/benefit rationale explicit in any case.

One must also consider the role of the journal editors and consultants who reviewed this manuscript. There are those who believe that all journal articles using human subjects ought to include the basis for informed consent as part of the Method section. Indeed, a number of medical journals currently refuse to review manuscripts submitted without such data. I subscribe to the belief that when a potential problem of a subject's rights is at issue, a discussion of the cost/benefit rationale is imperative. Certainly the fact that a study was or was not approved by an institutional or peer review panel ought to be noted. By not insisting on this data, the editors of the journal in question appear to condone the practices, or at the very least tacitly suggest that the methods used represent the acceptable practices of researchers in the field.

When a journal has a rejection rate of 87% (APA Council of Editors, 1976), one must also be concerned about the overall scientific importance and quality in the content of its articles. I cannot help but wonder how the authors of rejected articles felt when they learned that a study of such dubious propriety and theoretical import was deemed worthy of inclusion among the best 13% of what is available in our field. Perhaps that is the most telling comment available on the current status of much psychological research. By placing this article in such a high-visibility position, we may certainly anticipate a veritable flood of bathroom research, to be followed by a book of readings, and ultimately, by a review article.

References

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