



Sociological Frameworks Applied to the Port Royal Experiment and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study

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Drawing from medical sociology and theories of social institutions, Emma Wilson offers a sociological commentary on two famous historical studies fraught with underlying racism. Ultimately, Wilson argues, a combined historical and sociological orientation can protect against the repetition of racial bias in the future. This essay was written for Reconstruction of the American South with Dr. Tonnia Anderson.

INTRODUCTION

THROUGHOUT THIS PAPER, I will be comparing certain studies from history to sociological concepts in order to emphasize the relevance of social theory through history, both retrospectively and with consideration for the future. I will be analyzing the Port Royal Experiment and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in comparison to the sociological concepts that specifically apply to them. The Port Royal Experiment will be examined with the application of the concepts behind social institutions, while the Tuskegee Syphilis Study will be examined with the application of medical sociology.

The limitations of the application of theory have been heavily discussed, but the value of conceptualization primarily lies within the required theoretical mindset, which enhances understanding of social progressions (Cockerham and Scambler 3).

BACKGROUND ON THE STUDIES DISCUSSED

Tuskegee Syphilis Study

THE TUSKEGEE SYPHILIS STUDY WAS started in 1932 by the Tuskegee Institute in partnership with the Public Health Service in order to examine the effects of syphilis in black men over time (“Tuskegee”). The original intent of the study was to encourage the concept of non-racially-discriminative healthcare. The study consisted of 600 black men, 399 of whom had syphilis and 201 who did not. The 399 men with syphilis were told only that they had “bad blood” and were never at any point during the study told that they had syphilis. The term “bad blood” was used as a blanket expression for several diseases such as anemia, syphilis, and fatigue. The study was set to last for only six months but instead went on for 40 years in order to record the long-term effects of the disease. The men involved in the study were given free medical exams, free meals, and burial insurance, but they never received any treatment to cure their illness. Between the time the study began and when it ended, medicine advanced in ways that could have potentially helped or even cured the subjects of syphilis, but at no point in the experiment were they offered any sort of treatment, even though they were told they were being treated. In 1947, penicillin was commonly accepted as the best way to treat syphilis and would have been extremely helpful for the subjects, had the conductors of the study given it to them, or had they even informed them that they had the disease. In 1926, six years before the study began, syphilis was a major health problem, and roughly 35 percent of the reproductive age population had it. This fact is largely why the study began in the first place, in order to gain more information on the effects of such a prevalent disease, which

would lead to the benefit of other individuals with syphilis. However, in 1947, the percentage of people with syphilis began lowering because of the use of penicillin as treatment. The study of the effect of syphilis in individuals became less important because of the new treatment. These medical advancements that could have helped the subjects in the Tuskegee study were not provided to them, nor were they even aware that they had the disease to begin with. What started as an experiment that was meant to inform people about the effects of a popular disease led to the subjects themselves not being informed of the effects of their own illness.

Port Royal Experiment

The Port Royal Experiment was set into action after an attack from Union soldiers forced Confederate soldiers out of their forts in 1861. The Confederate soldiers pressed the white residents in the area to evacuate the area as well, meaning most of their slaves would be left behind. The estimated total number of slaves left behind was 8,000, most of whom took the absence of their previous masters to mean that they could take what they had left and claim their own freedom as well (Ochiai 98). While they were not officially free, they were not to be returned to their masters, either (especially since their masters were the ones that left them in the first place). So, the official label that the former slaves were given was contraband of war, even though most people involved with the experiment considered them to be free throughout the experiment. Lacking both captivation and overseers, the “freed” slaves were given an opportunity to display their potential without the looming fear of punishment and with their newfound sense of freedom. The Treasury Department and many local Northern abolitionists were intrigued to see what could come out of leaving the now-freed slaves to their own devices on what used to be the land that they toiled over during their enslavement, now left for their own benefit. The Port Royal Experiment is what they came up with in terms of conditions and supervision. In 1862, Edward Pierce was sent out to observe the freed slaves, who

were now subjects in an experiment that would set a precedent for future endeavors surrounding the emancipation of slaves throughout the nation. Pierce motioned for educators to also be sent to teach and supervise the newly “freed” slaves in the community. Beginning in March of 1862, 53 teachers, doctors, and preachers began living and working in the area of Port Royal in order to edify the freedmen and their new community, while also helping with the commercial aspects of their work; these individuals came to be known as Gideonites. The shared purpose of participating in the experiment for the Gideonites was to help the “freed” slaves successfully display characteristics of a society with a thriving economy and intelligent community. To the Gideonites, the success of the experiment could potentially lead to the emancipation of all slaves nationally. So, the end goal was to help the subjects thrive in order to convince the nation of the ability of all slaves, which then would lead to their emancipation (Ochiai 94).

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

THE TUSKEGEE SYPHILIS STUDY WAS created predominantly to help convince people of the importance of medical treatment for Black people, but by the end of the study the opposite had been accomplished (“Tuskegee”). The fact that the study was only expected to last six months, then ended up persisting for 40 years, safely suggests that the motive of the experiment may have shifted. Not only were the participants denied treatment, but they were told that they were receiving treatment which prevented them from seeking out other medical attention. So instead of spreading awareness of the importance of non-racially-discriminative medical care, the conductors of the study only helped to preserve the racially prejudicial ideals within the medical world. The experiment ended up doing the opposite of what it had originally intended to accomplish. The racial taxonomies that were prevalent within the antebellum period were also present in these experiments. The conductors of the Syphilis

Study were aware of these taxonomies and began the study because of them. However, there was a change in motive as the study progressed, and the experiment only perpetuated the taxonomies as opposed to acknowledging them and combating them.

The Port Royal Experiment can in part be considered a valiant effort made towards the abolition of slavery. However, there were a few fatal flaws from the beginning of the experiment, the first one being that there was no clear answer about whether or not the slaves were free. At no point within the experiment was the enslavement status of the individuals in the study made clear (Parten). Another defect in the experiment surrounds whether or not the former slaves were actually being given the land or if they were just using it until further notice. The status of the land was equally confusing for people in the experiment and for the people that attempted to buy the land after the experiment ended. If the people conducting the experiment knew the answer to both these questions, the fact that the people being studied did not made it more confusing and difficult to adapt to their status once the study ended. Overall, the study abused the rights of the people involved by keeping them in the dark on issues that directly affected their wellbeing.

There are certain implications within both the Port Royal Experiment and The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, implications that black people are less than human. Because information was withheld from the participating individuals in both experiments, unethical decisions were made without the consultation of the people of color involved. The lack of choices that the participants received during the experiments indicates the paternalistic nature of both studies.

MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY

A FIELD OF RESEARCH THAT IS helpful in preventing the continuation of racial taxonomies is medical sociology. Medical sociology is the correlation between the factors that make up an individual's status within a society in relation to their medical record/care. Essentially,

it is the relationship between social roles and health. Through medical sociology, statistical data surrounding the social status of individuals can be compiled with the intentions of comparing that status to the average medical treatment of similar individuals (Hoppe). This data is primarily used to find relationships between different demographics of people in order to identify potential disparities surrounding their medical care. However, the data can also be used to analyze possible biases present in the institution of healthcare, a healthcare institute, or even just a healthcare representative. The detection of biases in any of these entities is challenging because they are likely to be systemic or implicit. To retrospectively identify the implicit or systemic biases present in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study may require more data surrounding the ethics of the experiment than was recorded. Conductors of newer experiments are obligated by the research ethics board to take tests that measure their biases (FitzGerald). While it is clear that bias was a large factor in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, without the proper data needed to measure the biases, it is difficult to pinpoint, through medical sociology alone, what caused the change in intentions as the study progressed.

The application of medical sociology to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study is also important when considering the racial specification of the study. Originally, the racial requirements for the study were there to benefit the specified race, but as time passed, the withholding of information from the participants became more calculated. When the cure for syphilis was invented within the time of the study, and the conductors of the study still proceeded to withhold the diagnosis from the participants, then the real motive behind the study was revealed. Confirming the study's warped intentions makes the acknowledgment of the study's internal racial prejudices all the more important.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

IN THE SAME WAY THAT THE Tuskegee Syphilis Study can be viewed through the lens of medical sociology, so can the Port Royal Experiment be viewed through the lens of social institutions. A social institution is a structure that is enforced for the sole purpose of social order; social institutions are used to govern a community's behavior. When slavery began in America, people had to be convinced of how beneficial it was, not only for just the people profiting from their labor, but also for the slaves themselves. As people grew to accept slavery, they began to view it as a necessary evil. Once people started to view slavery this way, there was more demand for slaves, and soon the entire population became dependent on slavery. This caused slavery to become embedded into the social systems, which consequently made it an institution. The institutionalization of slavery made its abolition all the more difficult (Braybrooke). When considering the implications of the Port Royal Experiment it is important to recognize that slavery, at the time, was an institution. So, when suddenly, the status of 8,000 slaves changed from "slave" to (potentially) "free," it was a pretty big deal. The demolition of a social institution requires more effort than what is likely achievable with one indefinite experiment, primarily because the Port Royal Experiment did not seem to have any sort of end goal or even a basis for starting the experiment in the first place. So, the motive for the experiment was likely not to abolish slavery as an institution, but more to examine how slaves would function as a unit after having just been freed. No matter what the intended consequences of the experiment were, the unexpected consequences led to the reconsideration of slavery as a social institution. The unexpected consequences of the Port Royal Experiment are of much importance when considering the study's effect on social institutions (Merton). Within the Port Royal Experiment, the institution of slavery left a void that needed to be filled in order for the community to survive. Slavery was quickly replaced by reinforcing the already existing institution

of the economy. With the influx of seemingly free people, the economy had more buyers and sellers after the Port Royal Experiment was in full swing, which led to a greater need for a strong local economy.

COMPARING THE CONCEPTS

MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY DOES NOT HAVE very much relevance to the Port Royal Experiment. The Port Royal Experiment has more to do with the reestablishment of social institution, more specifically the demolition of slavery as an institution and the repercussions of these acts. So, medical sociology has very little to do with the strengthening of a non-medical social institution. However, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study does have some application to social institutions. Health care is a social institution, so to prevent a race of people from receiving proper health care is to rob them of the basic rights that every individual within a society is owed. By this standard, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study can be viewed through both the lens of medical sociology and of social institutions. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that the Tuskegee Syphilis Study had a large impact on the social institution of health care, the study did spark a dialogue about ethics, which in turn led to a reformation of regulations surrounding medical/social studies, forever changing the way medical studies operate.

CONCLUSION

THE RETROSPECTIVE APPLICATION OF sociological concepts to studies throughout history is beneficial in gaining insight into the social structures existing both today and during the time of the study. The most appropriate sociological lens with which the Tuskegee Syphilis Study should be viewed is that of medical sociology. The linking of an individual's status to the medical treatment they receive directly relates to the lack of treatment given to the African American men that participated in the Syphilis Study. However, the point can also

be made that this study could be examined with the consideration of social institutions, which is the primary theory applied to the Port Royal Experiment. The role of social institutions within the Port Royal Experiment is especially important when considering how slavery affected those institutions. The social ramifications of both the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Port Royal Experiment are important when considering the human rights aspects of future experiment or studies. Overall, the application of social theory to historical events is beneficial in order to prevent the potential repetition of negative historical events, especially if they are directly related to social status. ►►

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