The Needle and the Damage Done: Expressing and Managing Pain in EEG Experiments.

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Pain is a well-established topic of study in psychology. Further, it is also an ethical issue, insofar as professional codes of conduct exist stipulating that subjects should not experience harm, and that experimenters should take all steps to mitigate against the possibility. Yet, beyond what is contained in these codes and best practice advice provided in textbooks, we currently lack an empirical understanding of how pain and discomfort are managed as practical matters during psychology experiments. Taking electroencephalogram (EEG) experiments as an example, this study investigates how pain is made interactionally relevant and how experimenters and subjects deal with it during these sessions. The analysis also explores how expressions of pain are tied to the actions and activities occurring during such experiments.

The data are video recordings of cognitive neuroscience experiments using EEG technology, with 68 hours of data from four laboratories. Conversation analysis and qualitative video analysis are used to examine collection of *non-solicited pain displays*- instances where subjects say, “that hurts”, “ouch” or something similar. seemingly spontaneously. That is, not in response to some prior talk or question. The cases all occur during a specific part of these experiments; the set-up phase.

In these cases, pain emerges as relevant because of some direct physical action from an experimenter. The pain reports occur while experimenters are engaged in a main task at hand (filling EEG cap electrodes with gel) and in a working configuration (different experimenters working on different areas of the cap). Experimenters must attend to the subject and deal with his/her ‘pain’.

The analysis documents two different ways that subjects can display pain and the different ways that these displays are subsequently dealt with. The study shows that pain is inextricably bound up with the activities occurring and way work is organized during EEG set-ups. For example, subjects tailor their pain reports given their concurrent engagement in tasks such as filling out questionnaires and experimenters must coordinate their work with the demands of responding to the subject’s pain. Experimenters can respond to pain displays in a variety of ways- by apologizing and suspending their work amongst other actions. Finally, two dimensions of responsibility emerge as relevant concerns in how pain is displayed and dealt with- who is responsible for inflicting the pain and the various responsibilities of, and as, the lead experimenter.