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Word Count: 2200

What was the significance of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment on African American Civil Rights from its initiation in 1932 to its termination in 1972?

Part I: Identification & Source Evaluation

Word Count: 465

What was the significance of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment on African American Civil Rights from its initiation in 1932 to its termination in 1972?

On July 26, 1972, journalist Jean Heller published a story in the *New York Times* titled “Syphilis Victims in U.S. Study Went Untreated for 40 Years.”¹ This source is relevant because it reveals a variety of information about the study, and at the time of its publication it was the first major publicity effort which informed people of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. The origin of the source is valuable to answering the research question because it is a primary source, giving direct insight on how African Americans were viewed at the time, plus it was published in the *Times*, giving the author credibility. The origin can also be limiting because the documents came from an ex-USPHS employee, Peter Buxtun, which biases the source towards focusing on the negative information of the study. A value of its purpose is that it informed many people who did not know about the 40-year long cruel study, which sparked civil activism. However, other sources must also be used for information because, even from its subtitle “SYPHILIS VICTIMS GOT NO THERAPY,” its purpose is limited by using emotion heavily to sympathize with the patients, creating a one-sided story.² The content is valuable because, coming from an ex-member of the USPHS, the information will likely be accurate. Meanwhile, the story also includes statements from J.D. Millar (head of the Tuskegee Study), which limits the content’s use

¹ Heller, Jean. "Syphilis Victims in U.S. Study Went Untreated for 40 Years: SYPHILIS VICTIMS GOT NO THERAPY." *New York Times*, July 26, 1972.

² Heller, “Syphilis Victims”, 1972.

by feeding false information such as the study was “never clandestine,” and “researchers told patients they could have treatment at any time.”³

On April 28, 1973, the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare published a final report from an ad-hoc advisory panel regarding conclusions from an investigation of the study.⁴ This source is relevant because it answered controversies about the Tuskegee study, along with prescribing solutions critical to answering the research question. Other than being a primary source and government publication, the origin of this source is valuable because, in a race-heavy study, it was written by 4 white and 5 African American members, excluding racial bias from investigation.⁵ In contrast, professional literacy could be a limitation of this panel, since the members were gathered in a hurry. For the purpose, one value is that it decided the Tuskegee study was unjustifiable, pushing for codified racial equality. A limitation, however, is that the government is notorious for writing and promising civil rights, then avoiding full implementation. Nevertheless, the content is a value to this investigation because it consists of many thorough, useful pages of information on the experiment. It can be limiting, though, because later discoveries revealed failures in the panel, like misunderstanding crucial information of the study.⁶

³ Heller, “Syphilis Victims”, 1972.

⁴ *Final Report of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study Ad Hoc Advisory Panel*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Public Health Service. April 28, 1973.

⁵ *Final Report*. U.S. Department of Health. April 28, 1973. 3.

⁶ Brandt, Allan M. "Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study." *The Hastings Center Report* 8, no. 6 (1978): 26.

Part II: Investigation

Word count: 1315

The 20th century was a crucial turning point for the civil rights of African Americans in the United States. From the moment Booker T. Washington spoke of his dream, in 1895, that African Americans could be equal to whites, progress was unmistakably made.⁷ However, one historical event that is argued to be a roadblock or catalyst for African American civil rights is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. In 1932, the United States Public Health Service initiated an experiment in Macon County, Alabama called “The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male.”⁸ The purpose was to determine the effects of latent syphilis by examining its natural course and whether it could be, or needed to be, treated.⁹ Although it was first seen as a simple, inexpensive project expected to last 6 months, the study lasted 40 years.¹⁰ Throughout its duration, the sheer cruelty and immorality can be sufficient to see that it did not contribute to African American civil rights, but led inequality for decades. On the other hand, in coordination with the Civil Rights Movement in later years, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study was significant for African American civil rights because media publicity attracted attention to the suffering and exploitation of African Americans, policies and lawsuits took place to substantiate the civil rights of African Americans, and the aftermath of the study finalized the change in social image of African Americans.

⁷ "Tuskegee Study and Health Benefit Program - CDC - NCHHSTP." U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee. Accessed February 25, 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Brandt, Allan M. "Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study." *The Hastings Center Report* 8, no. 6 (1978): 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

One perspective to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study was that it was a roadblock for the advancement of African American civil rights. For one, the experiment was founded upon racial prejudice. The USPHS chose 600 black males to participate in the study, 399 with syphilis and 201 without.¹¹ Of this group, nearly all poor, illiterate black sharecroppers were taken advantage of by being withheld information of the study, never giving consent, and being told they had, not syphilis, but “bad blood.”¹² Taking advantage of and lying to African Americans, especially with prejudice, should immediately be seen as wrong, but surprisingly wasn’t. Instead, it was justified by the prevalence of Darwinism at the time. Dr W.T. English, for example, used this theory to hold that African Americans were inferior physically.¹³ The result was decades of sickness and 325 deaths by the end of the experiment.¹⁴ For an experiment to be this detrimental to African Americans, yet still ignored for so long, it is arguable that the Tuskegee Study developed an institutional abuse, making social equality more difficult to achieve. Furthermore, civil rights specifically were never addressed, therefore proving insignificant to African Americans.

However, the study was significant to their civil rights by publicizing the suffering and exploitation of African Americans in correlation with the Civil Rights Movement. Starting with historical events in the South, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), Sit-in Movement (1960), “I have a Dream” speech (1963), and more, people began recognizing the issue of African American rights in the US.¹⁵ This caused increasing publicity to spread the ideology that African Americans deserve equal rights, which influenced Tuskegee quickly. Peter Buxtun,

¹¹ "Tuskegee Study" U.S. Public Health Service. Accessed February 25, 2019.

¹² "About the USPHS Syphilis Study." Tuskegee University. Accessed February 25, 2019; "Tuskegee Study" U.S. Public Health Service. Accessed February 25, 2019.

¹³ Brandt, *Racism and Research*, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Penguin Books, 2013.

responsible largely for exposing the study, made efforts to end the experimentation of African Americans as early as 1967, leaving the USPHS in 1968 and reporting the study's document to journalist Jean Heller.¹⁶ Published in 1972, Heller's article in the Times informed thousands of clueless Americans about the treatment of African Americans, comparable to "guinea pigs."¹⁷ If it had not been for King, to Buxtun, to Heller, people would have continued to treat the study like it didn't exist. Heller also mentioned that after penicillin became popular in the 50s, African Americans were still withheld treatment, shocking members of congress and citizens throughout the country.¹⁸ This gained attention in places that could bring change to African American civil rights (congress), thereby proving to be significant in the process. In this way, the study was effective in furthering African American civil rights by publicizing the tragedy of their exploitation and suffering, contributing as well to the civil rights movement.

Furthermore, changes were brought in policies and lawsuits were held to substantiate civil rights for African Americans. The remarks in the national press lead to an ad-hoc (emergency) advisory panel to consider the Tuskegee case.¹⁹ Upon examination, the panel recommended immediate termination of the study and treatment of African Americans.²⁰ The panel was a victory for African American civil rights because it displayed anti-racist government action to protect its people, specifically those discriminated against. To substantiate, the panel also recommended that adjustments to the DHEW policies be made: voluntary consent being

¹⁶ "Tuskegee Truth Teller." *The American Scholar*. February 01, 2018. Accessed March 21, 2019.

¹⁷ Heller, Jean. "Syphilis Victims in U.S. Study Went Untreated for 40 Years: SYPHILIS VICTIMS GOT NO THERAPY." *New York Times*, July 26, 1972.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Brandt, *Racism and Research*, 21.

²⁰ *Final Report of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study Ad Hoc Advisory Panel*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Public Health Service. April 28, 1973. 18.

essential, experiments must be for the good of society, and high degree of risk not taken.²¹

Ensuring the protection of their health and giving them the option to say no to experiments gives undeniable rights to African Americans patients for preventing events like this from ever happening again. Then, in 1973, Fred Gray represented the test subjects in a lawsuit against the US government, fighting for their constitutional rights by using racial discrimination and consent.²² Gray states in his book that the goal of the lawsuit was to bring attention to the long-overlooked case, which it successfully did, additionally providing a \$10 million settlement in damages and a Tuskegee Health Benefit Program for surviving participants.²³ Proving such a large point to the US government provided African Americans with even more civil rights, in health and law, than they had ever had before. African Americans had health benefits they were never offered before, syphilitic or not, and given proper justice in the name of court.

Finally, the closing of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment solidified the societal image of African Americans as equal to whites, allowing further opportunity for equality in civil rights. Since the study, along with other historical events, pushed heavily for the equality of African American civil rights, it soon came. In 1975, a Voting Rights Act was passed, as a final measure of racial equality.²⁴ This event was pivotal due to the fact that African Americans were no longer seen as “guinea pigs” in society, but equal citizens who had as much political power as any other citizen of the United States. Then in 1997, President Bill Clinton apologized in the White House for the atrocity that is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.²⁵ He apologized for the racist premises of the experiment, betrayal of a people, and announced 5 goals the government would adhere to in

²¹ *Final Report*. U.S. Department of Health. April 28, 1973.

²² Gray, Fred D. *The Tuskegee Syphilis Study: The Real Story and Beyond*. 1998. 80, 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, 84; "Tuskegee Study" U.S. Public Health Service. Accessed February 25, 2019.

²⁴ David H. Hunter, *The 1975 Voting Rights Act and Language Minorities*, 25 *Cath. U. L. Rev.* 250 (1976).

²⁵ Clinton, Bill. *Speech, Apology For Study Done in Tuskegee*, The White House, Washington, D.C., May 16, 1997.

promise of change.²⁶ While only few patients had been alive to witness the speech, it proved that the study had been significant to the civil rights of African Americans by honoring their societal image as an important part of our country. Clinton's apology served as the final statement to denounce the institutional abuse in Tuskegee and promote equality.

In conclusion, while it is possible to see how the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment was insignificant to African American civil rights due to the ignorance, continuity, and immorality of the case, overall, the study had a significant impact on African American civil rights. This is because, at a time when traction for racial injustice was rapidly increasing, the experiment was publicized through the Times and revealed one of the worst things that had been done to African Americans in our country. In addition to that, the study led to a number of changes in the governmental policy, including consent, ethics, and other issues. These changes were positive for the civil rights of African Americans because they facilitated the equality of their treatment and the prevention of such a case happening again. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment was also significant to African American civil rights through Fred Gray's lawsuit against the United States which exposed how the government violated the constitutional rights of their citizens. And last, Clinton's apology brought a great change in the depiction of African Americans, from 1932 to its aftermath in the 90s. African Americans were no longer considered inferior guinea pigs, but fellow US Citizens.

²⁶ Clinton, Bill. Speech, Apology For Study Done in Tuskegee, The White House, Washington, D.C., May 16, 1997.

Part III: Reflection

Word Count: 420

The most difficult part of this essay for me was perspective and the research process.

To write a dimensional investigation, historians have to include multiple perspectives. They see the situation from news reports, government files, people affected, and so on. I included perspectives by finding the opposite of my thesis (that it was not significant to African American civil rights), by using doctors (W.T. English) who carried out the study. Then, to actually argue my thesis, I included different perspectives such as Jean Heller and Fred Gray's public attention, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's policy change, and Clinton's apology to what the study did to African Americans, which I strung together to form my argument.

While researching, the first thing historians do in an investigation is gather their resources, where they search databases, libraries, and other places to find evidence with their event. I, however, was completely caught off guard when I realized that the amount of sources I thought I saw earlier in the process were never really there. By digging deeper, I learned about two factors that make finding resources much more difficult: time frame and exclusiveness. Over time, most primary sources lose their value and public attraction, and so while people were impatiently writing about the study in 1932, their publication likely diminished in the 40s and 50s, when no one was reading them anymore. Exclusiveness was limiting because the researchers of the Tuskegee study published their articles once every four-to-six years and only to few medical associations. Journals that my other sources confirmed, such as in 1936, 1955, and so on, teased me through the process, because I could never get a hold of them.

Once historians have their resources, they must then analyze them for accuracy. I learned how important it is to fact-check your sources because failing to do so can lead to you using false information in your investigation. I encountered this once when the Chief of Venereal Disease Branch (Millar) told undeniable lies regarding the Syphilis Study in Heller's report, defending the study by saying it was never kept behind curtains and patients were told they can be treated whenever. This was a limitation to the research process because it complicated things- it required me to do further research and figure out which side is telling the truth. I even almost used incorrect information from the HEW report, which I had to go back and clear from my essay when I discovered from another source they had misunderstood things.

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