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# Psychology Ethics Down Under: A Survey of Student Subject Pools in Australia

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A survey of the 37 psychology departments offering courses accredited by the Australian Psychological Society yielded a 92% response rate. Sixty-eight percent of departments employed students as research subjects, with larger departments being more likely to do so. Most of these departments drew their student subject pools from introductory courses. Student research participation was strictly voluntary in 57% of these departments, whereas 43% of the departments have failed to comply with normally accepted ethical standards. It is of great concern that institutional ethics committees apparently continue to condone, or fail to act against, unethical research practices. Although these committees have a duty of care to all subjects, the final responsibility for conducting research in an ethical manner lies with the individual researcher.

**Key words:** research ethics, research subjects, research participants, coercion

Undergraduate students are the major source of data for psychological research carried out in colleges and universities (Korn, 1987; Sieber & Saks, 1989). Notwithstanding the questionable validity of research that relies on such a distinct group within the population, there is nothing necessarily objectionable about the use of students as research subjects. However, ethical issues associated with their use may arise if the students are in any way coerced into participation.

Sieber and Saks (1989) surveyed universities and colleges located in the U.S. to ascertain the proportion that employed students as subjects and the manner in which those students were recruited. Seventy-four percent of all respondents to their survey reported using student subject pools. Only 11% of respondents

employed subject pools that were strictly voluntary, while the manner in which 63% of the institutions recruited subjects was in breach of federal law and of the American Psychological Association's (APA, 1982) ethical guidelines.

Unlike the U.S., Australia does not have federal prohibitions against coercing students to participate in research. There are, however, various institutional prohibitions against such action. The *Code of Professional Conduct* of the Australian Psychological Society (APS, 1986) enjoins the use of nonvoluntary participants in psychological research through two provisions. Section E.7 requires that "participants' consent to be involved in . . . research is genuinely voluntary" (p. 8), and Section E.8 admonishes against the use of "undue pressure" (p. 8) to secure participation. In similar vein, Appendix E.6 prohibits the use of a "position of authority to exert undue pressure" (p. 22) to secure research participation.

Another control on the coercion of research subjects is through the supervisory role of institutional ethics committees. These committees are not only intended to enforce the policies of their respective institutions, but are also charged by various federal funding bodies (e.g., the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Grants Scheme) with enforcing the ethical standards of those bodies.

Despite these injunctions, anecdotal reports suggested that some Australian universities and colleges use students as nonvoluntary subjects in research. We therefore decided to conduct a survey similar to that carried out by Sieber and Saks (1989) in the U.S. Indeed, we followed an approach much like theirs, but we made some minor modifications when an actual replication seemed unnecessary or impractical. Notwithstanding this article's focus on the use of psychology students as subjects, the research is actually a part of a larger ongoing project examining the role of both psychology and medical students as research participants.

## METHOD

### Population Surveyed

A list of all tertiary educational institutions that had departments conducting APS-accredited courses in either undergraduate or graduate psychology was obtained from the APS. There were 38 such departments in all; these composed the entire survey population.

### Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was a nonconfidential, 27-question, four-page questionnaire entitled "Psychology Department Subject Pool Survey." The questionnaire was based on the census form of Sieber and Saks (1989).<sup>1</sup> Modifications

<sup>1</sup>We thank Joan Sieber for providing us with a copy of the survey instrument used by Sieber and Saks (1989).

were made to Sieber and Saks's census form when a question did not accurately reflect the structure of Australian tertiary educational institutions or when it was believed that the clarity of a question could be improved.

Twenty-one of the questions required the respondent to mark one, of a number of alternative answers, with a tick, 3 of the questions allowed for multiple responses, and the remaining 3 questions recorded the numbers of students and staff in the department and the title of the person completing the survey.<sup>2</sup>

### Procedure

Along with the survey, a cover letter was sent to the Head of the Psychology Department of each of the 38 universities and colleges in the APS's list of approved tertiary courses. The addresses of the relevant departments were obtained from the APS.

Because this study is part of a broader survey, the letter stated that an Australia-wide survey was being conducted on the use of students as research subjects in medicine and the behavioral sciences. Department heads were asked to take the few minutes necessary to participate in the survey. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was included with the survey and cover letter.

Letters were initially sent out on May 6, 1991. Although we had not originally planned a second mailing, most respondents included their institution's name on the returned survey form, and the remaining institutions that responded were identifiable from the postmark on the return envelopes. This allowed us to send another copy of the survey instrument, stamped return envelope, and modified cover letter to all departments that had not returned the original survey form. The modified cover letter contained a statement that the success of a survey such as ours relied on the participation and good will of all potential respondents, along with a repeat request that they complete the survey.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Return Rate

Following the first mailing, 26 of the institutions returned completed surveys. An additional seven surveys were received in response to the second round of mailings. The first author was also able to complete a form on behalf of one of the other departments based on consultation with a staff member in the Psychology Department concerned and the department's student handouts and information brochures.

The psychology course controller at one university telephoned us to say that he would not be returning the survey because the information sought was

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<sup>2</sup>A copy of the survey form is available from the authors.

confidential—this, notwithstanding that the institution concerned is a public, federally funded establishment!

Another university informed us that two of the departments to which we had mailed surveys were in fact the same department divided across two campuses in that university, which were administered as a single unit. This meant that there were really only 37 psychology departments relevant to our research. Completed survey instruments were available for 34 of them. This represents a 92% response rate, a rate which is almost identical to Sieber and Saks's (1989) survey.

### Departmental Use of Students as Subject

Of the 34 departments that responded, 68% (23) stated that they used students as research subjects. Note that a number of the universities indicated that, although they were not using students as research subjects in 1991, they intended introducing student subject pools in the 1992 academic year.

The tendency was for universities and colleges with large numbers of students enrolled in psychology to employ students as research subjects. Departments using students as subjects had a mean of 613 enrolled students, as opposed to 337 for those departments not using students in research,  $t(28) = 2.28, p < .05$ .

Of those institutions using students as subjects, 57% (13) used only first-year psychology students, 17% (4) used first- and second-year psychology students, 17% (4) used psychology students from all undergraduate and graduate levels, and 9% (2) failed to provide details.

### Coercion of Students

Of those institutions using students as research subjects, 35% (8) penalized the students for nonparticipation. Four institutions lowered grades by 3% to 6% for nonparticipation, three required substitute work either in the form of an essay or a library assignment, and one university gave students a choice between a 3% decrease in grade or submitting an essay.

Two departments provided what might be described as academic incentives for participation rather than penalties for nonparticipation. In one case, students were able to earn an additional 5% credit by participating as research subjects, though it was not clear what this means if the students already scored over 95%. In the other case, the university stated that if a student participated as a research subject and their final grade fell at the borderline of two grades, then they will receive the higher grade.

For the remaining 57% (13) of institutions using students as subjects, students participated on a strictly voluntary basis. This result is better than the 11% reported by Sieber and Saks (1989), but it is still far from ideal.

At first sight, the two institutions that provided academic incentives for research participation appear to have created a means of rewarding students for their participation without coercing them. However, further reflection suggests that this view is incorrect. Consider two students, one at an institution granting an additional 5% credit for participation and one at an institution that penalizes students with a 5% decrease in grade for nonparticipation. If the first student receives a grade of 49% and the second student receives a grade of 54%, both would feel equally compelled to become research subjects to avoid failing. Furthermore, these poorly performing students may feel considerably greater compulsion to participate than a top-performing student.

### Value of Participation for the Student

Of the departments using students as subjects, 75% (16) stated that they indicated the value of research participation to students in class announcements and in handouts. One respondent did not indicate the value of research participation, 1 respondent was unsure of departmental policy, and the remaining 5 respondents failed to indicate what their departmental policy was.

All 10 departments that coerced students to participate as subjects in research informed the students of the benefits to be gained from participation. One of these departments forwarded a copy of a document about research participation, which is given to their students. The document mentioned, among other things, three benefits to be gained from participating in research. These were: (a) participation provided researchers with the necessary subjects to advance psychological knowledge, (b) students were exposed to psychological concepts and theories that were beyond the scope of the coursework, and (c) students obtained firsthand experience of the ways in which psychological research was conducted.

It is hardly surprising to find coercive action being justified this way. In our experience, however, the reality is that the second and third stated benefits often do not in fact accrue to the student participant. Researchers frequently have neither the time nor the inclination to explain their research and its methodology to subjects, and students leave the research session none the wiser for their participation.

There appears to be a certain dishonesty about representing research participation as beneficial to the actual participants unless a department has a well articulated, well administered means of integrating the experience of participation with the overall aims and objectives of the psychology course. One university had clearly attempted to provide such an integration by requiring that all research projects involving student participation be presented as a poster display within the department.

In the event that a department does properly integrate research participation with the rest of its courses, it still seems reasonable to ask if that same

knowledge could not be better imparted to students by way of a specific educational module that did not require them to become nonvoluntary subjects in research.

### Prior Knowledge

Only 1 of the 10 departments that required students to participate in research mentioned the requirement in its faculty handbook. The other 9 mentioned the requirement in course outlines. Unfortunately, faculty handbooks are the only way in which prospective students are likely to find out about psychology department course requirements. This means that students enrolling in 9 of these departments will only discover that research participation is compulsory after they have commenced their studies. In other words, they are denied the opportunity to make an informed judgment about the psychology course in which they would like to enroll unless they specifically write to each department requesting a course outline; even then, this outline will often not be available until after the commencement of the academic year.

### Ethics Review Procedures

Ideally, institutional ethics committees should review proposals for research before the research itself is undertaken. Of the institutions requiring students to participate in research, 70% always referred research to their committee for approval, whereas the remaining 30% sometimes referred research to the committee.

Although it is heartening that institutions have ethics committees, there is, nonetheless, something distinctly worrisome about the results. How is it that the 10 institutions that coerce students into participating in research are able to obtain ethics committee approval for their actions? Two possibilities are apparent. First, the relevant psychology departments fail to mention to their ethics committees that student research participation is nonvoluntary. Second, the ethics committees, like the departments, manage to persuade themselves that nonvoluntary student participation is acceptable, is different from research using nonvoluntary nonstudent subjects, and thereby does not constitute coercion.

Of these two alternatives, the second appears to be the most likely and the one of greatest concern. If an ethics committee is able to be convinced that the use of nonvoluntary student subjects is acceptable, then it suggests that they consider students to be less worthy of human-rights protection than other human subjects. Furthermore, it brings into question the value and quality of decisions being made by such committees, and nonstudents might reasonably ask whether they are really being protected by the review process or whether,

like student subjects, their rights are being systematically violated at the convenience of the institution.

In many ways, it is remarkable that this article could dwell so much on coercion. As far as Australia is concerned, the direct question of coercion should never have arisen. The APS (1986) *Code of Professional Conduct* includes words like *genuinely voluntary*, but it does not include *coercion*.

## CONCLUSION

Of the 37 Australian colleges and universities with APS-accredited or undergraduate or graduate psychology courses, 92% (34) responded to a survey on the participation of students as subjects in research. In 53% of those institutions that did use students as subjects, participation was entirely voluntary. In the remaining 47%, some form of coercive pressure was put on students to increase their likelihood of participating as research subjects. These coercive measures either took the form of grade penalties for nonparticipation; grade increases for participation; or the requirement that a student complete alternative work, such as an essay or assignment.

We believe that the prevalence of compulsory, nonvoluntary participation is cause for shame as well as concern. It is difficult to understand how a profession that purports to seek high standards of ethical conduct can allow the continuation of behavior that is clearly in breach of its promulgated ethical standards. It is also difficult to understand how institutional ethics committees have been able to accept the participation of students as nonvoluntary subjects in research but take strong action against other human-rights violations. Is it because these committees take the Orwellian view that, although all humans are equal, some are more equal than others? If the growth of psychological knowledge is reliant on the use of coerced subject participation, then it is time for psychologists to rethink their approach to research.

Another cause for concern relates to the veracity of data collected from coerced subjects. As J. E. Sieber (personal communication, March 27, 1991) commented, the validity of data is questionable in direct proportion to the extent that a subject feels coerced. After all, if researchers do not fulfill their obligation to their subjects, then why should subjects fulfill their obligations of providing honest reports?

Although we believe that institutional ethics committees have failed in their duty of care, in the final analysis, the responsibility for coercing students to participate in research is that of the individuals who exploit them in the name of psychology and education. As stated in Section E.1 of the *Code of Professional Conduct* (APS, 1986, p. 8), "whatever guidance is sought from others, the responsibility for ensuring ethical practice in research remains with the principal investigator(s) and cannot be shared."



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