

## **Guidelines for the Use of the Participant Pool**

The Department of Psychology & Neuroscience maintains a participant pool composed of students in various psychology classes. Naturally, the participant pool provides researchers with convenient access to a large collection of potential participants. However, it also serves to help students understand the breadth of methodologies used in psychological research and to provide potential future researchers with some experience as a research participant. To be a good researcher, one needs to understand the experience of being a participant.

Class instructors decide whether or not they want to allow their students to participate in the participant pool. However, participation by students in the participant pool is voluntary. In fact, students must explicitly enroll themselves. They are not automatically enrolled by virtue of being in a participating psychology class. Students may decline to participate without prejudice to their academic progress. Students may exercise their right to decline by simply failing to enroll.

Researchers may participate in the participant pool by posting experiments to the participant pool. Participation by researchers in the participant pool (as an experimental study) is also voluntary. However, it is only open to members and affiliated members of the Department of Psychology. Since, the participant pool is a subset of the general adult population, any research protocol that has been approved for sampling from the typical adult population automatically has approval to use the participant pool. The informed consent approved for that research is valid for the participant pool. The recruitment material might need minor modifications for presentation on the participant pool website. Hence, in principle, all researchers who have an ethically approved project that is directed at the typical, adult, human population have access to the participant pool. However, access to the participant pool is an earned privilege, not an inalienable right. That right can be removed if the privilege is abused.

One must remember that, to some, the mere existence of participant pools walks a fine line with respect to the ethical treatment of participants. Usually this is more about the concept of the participant pool rather than actual ethically administered participant pools. Nevertheless, the participant pool must be managed carefully if the department is to maintain the privilege. The University Research Ethics Board has the authority to terminate the participant pool if it believes that it is not managed properly. The term "managed carefully" means that the rights, dignity, privacy, and autonomy of students must be respected at all times. In ethically ambiguous situations, the department must err on the side of the participants.

Because the potential participants are also potentially students of the particular researchers, there are additional ethical concerns that are not the norm for community-based samples. It is important that students feel that they have *free choice* to participate. It is also important that students feel that the administration of the participant pool is fair (that credit points are reasonable compensation for effort involved). Finally, it is also important that students feel that they will not be affected in a negative manner if they should decline to participate. To attain this state, there are several important guidelines, all of which must be consistent with the guidelines of the TCPS.

### **The Participant Pool**

When in operation, the participant pool is a website. The researcher posts an experiment with a fair amount of detail. For the student, this website lists a large number of experiments by name (title) in a unique random order for each logon session. Students browse the list of experiments and select those that are of interest. When selected, students are presented with a more elaborate description of the experiment (this is the ethically approved recruitment material). If the student is still interested, the student can proceed to sign up for the experiment. Usually signing up consists of selecting one of the available time slots that the researcher has made available. That is, the researcher lists the experiment *and* a number of potential time slots. Hence, all aspects of recruitment are handled by the participant pool website.

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In addition, the participant pool maintains a running tally of the participation of the student. That is, it tracks the credit points so that researchers need not worry about this detail. Once a student has signed up for an experiment, the participant pool will automatically grant the appropriate amount of credit *unless* the researcher intervenes to change that (e.g., if a student should cancel at the last minute, or if the number of points needs to increase to compensate for delays such as equipment failure).

There may be complications to this basic scheme for some experiments. In particular, studies may require multiple sessions (doable in the participant pool) or studies may consist of an online survey that does not have a particular scheduled time (there is a way to work around this). Participation in a particular study may lead to exclusions from other studies (doable). Participation in particular studies may have specific selection criteria that exclude most students (there is the provision for a pretest).

The participant pool operates at arms-length from class instructors. Ideally, instructors who grant credit points are not involved in the day-to-day maintenance of the participant pool (this depends to some degree on faculty availability). The day-to-day maintenance is conducted by the department secretariat, though instructors may monitor participation. Instructors only receive a listing of participation (credit points) at the end of the term.

### **Which Classes**

Any undergraduate or graduate psychology class may elect to participate in the participant pool. The decision to participate is made by the course instructor. The instructor may use any rationale for that decision. Instructors are *not obligated* to participate in the participant pool -- despite the claims of some overzealous students.

Instructors determine the number of credit points that they are willing to grant for their courses. As a guideline, it is suggested that there will be a maximum of three points per half-credit class. Offering only one or two points is perfectly reasonable.

However, *all* introductory courses and all sections of those courses must participate in the participant pool. This is necessary to ensure that all sections of the introductory course are treated equally. It is strongly recommended that all introductory classes grant three (3) credit points per term.

### **Credit Points**

Credit points are awarded for participation in experiments. Typically, points are awarded as  $\frac{1}{2}$  credit point per  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour of participation -- or part thereof. That participation includes the informed consent and debriefing, but it does not include the time to meet the participant. Hence, most experiments conducted in a lab will award a full credit point, even if the experiment only requires  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour.

As a general rule, online surveys that can be completed at the time and place of the participant's convenience (i.e., at home) are only granted  $\frac{1}{2}$  credit point regardless of length. This limitation is intended to ensure equitable involvement and effort by participants in online and lab-based studies. Without this restriction, online studies are too popular.

Credit points must be awarded even if the participant does *not* complete the session. That is, if the participant shows up for the appointment (and reads the informed consent), then the student will receive the credit points allocated to that session. Participants must feel that they have the right to terminate any session "without prejudice to pre-existing entitlements" (i.e., expected points). This is intended to ensure that participants really do feel free to quit whenever.

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Credit points may be denied if the participant does not show up for a session or if a participant cancels immediately prior to a session (i.e., before reading the informed consent). A participant cannot reasonably claim that they do not want to participate if they have not read the description of the study. There should be some genuine effort on the part of the participant. The participant pool is not intended to promote a form of academic dishonesty.

### **Multiple Sessions**

Credit points in a multi-session study should be awarded per session, at the end of each session. It is permissible to add a bonus for completion of all studies, but that bonus cannot be excessive.

### **Money**

It is permissible to offer money in lieu of, or in addition to, credit points. This would be applicable to a multi-session study that requires more time than the available points would cover. This would also apply to a long single session study (e.g., four hours). This would also apply to those students who have already earned some points and only need part of what a study offers.

### **Duration**

Credit points may only be applied to courses in the term (not year) that they are earned. Credit points do not carry over from one term to the next. Students may not bank credit points, and researchers may not advise or encourage students in this direction.

### **Educational Issues**

To enhance the educational process (the training of potential researchers), all studies that use the participant pool must provide debriefing, even if there is full informed consent. Note that the TCPS holds the debriefing is not required if there is full informed consent, simply because there is nothing to debrief. In that debriefing, it is appropriate to ask some questions that “test” the knowledge, interest or insights of the students.

In previous years, two questions were used to explicitly test knowledge acquisition. Students had to provide correct answers, and students could not receive points unless they had completed the test. However, that was misguided. As participants, students cannot be required to complete a test to gain compensation. This would violate the TCPS. Participants can terminate a study at any point, which includes just before debriefing (this is a thorny issue for ethics) without losing their expected compensation. Student participants have always had the right to terminate before completing the test, so the notion of “passing a test” is moot.

Instead, it is now advocated that researchers use the debriefing to instill some knowledge and to generate some interest, imagination, or enthusiasm for the topic. If a student does not want to engage in this activity, under the guidelines of the TCPS, they cannot be forced to. However, most students are interested in the studies that they complete because they are in psychology and because they have specifically chosen that particular study. Hence, most want to discuss the research. However, one must be mindful of the fact that this tends to change near the end of term (as students become more pressed for time, and more desperate for marks) and that such participation cannot be made mandatory.

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Secondly, to ensure that the educational component dominates their participation in studies, all students must be offered the option of a “walk-through” experience. In this the student participates as an observer. The student would select this option at the end of the informed consent. If the student elects to take the walk-through experience, the participating student completes the entire experiment (including informed consent and debriefing) but their data is *immediately* discarded. All students have this option in all experiments.

### **Ethical Issues**

The participant pool is a subset of the general adult population. As such, one can/should assume that the participants are adults capable of making informed decisions. However, because the power structure implicit within any educational institution, there are several issues. These issues are focused on the use of students as participants. That is, the issues are not specifically confined to the participant pool, but since most student participation is through the participant pool, the issues are of some relevance.

Firstly, there cannot be *any* coercion on the part of instructors. In fact, there cannot be *any perception* of coercion, even if that perception is in error. That is, all studies must exist at a clearly defined arms-length from the class and instructor. Any perception of coercion must be eliminated ruthlessly. To achieve this goal, the participant pool is maintained at arms-length from any one class. The initial contact for most students with the participant pool is through the anonymity of the web (including email), or through the departmental secretariat.

Secondly, the involvement of undergraduates (and to a lesser extent graduate students) in research creates particular problems. Undergraduate students may not have sufficient maturity to properly handle the information (particularly sensitive information) that they acquire about their peers. Furthermore, these undergraduates may have, or may form, a personal relationship with the participants. If the reader of this document is an undergraduate (or graduate) student, please note that this is not intended as an insult on all undergraduates. Since undergraduates are still early in their careers, this is (logically) more of a concern. This must be monitored carefully and dealt with on a case by case basis. Any undergraduate who fails to show proper respect for their participants (peers) will be barred from the use of the participant pool regardless of the status of the academic program (i.e., it will not matter if the student researcher is only half-way through an honours thesis).

Thirdly, there will be *no* in-class recruitment of participants for any study (regardless of whether or not the students participate in the participant pool). In particular, instructors must *not* promote their own studies in classes. More generally, instructors must not promote any specific study in classes. The participant pool is the only academically linked tool for recruitment. Instructors may promote the participant pool in general. In addition, instructors may not permit any other researchers to directly advertise a particular study within the context of the academic program. This includes formal and informal in-class recruitment as well as the posting of advertisements in classrooms or electronically (e.g., on WebCT). All studies must recruit student participants through the (relatively anonymous) online participant pool (or through external means). This helps to maintain an arms-length relationship between instructors and researchers, and between what is academic and what is research. It helps to maintain the distinction for students.

There are other minor issues. The compensation of credit points cannot be “excessive”. This is undue coercion. Instructors cannot tell students to participate in research if they want to raise their grades -- this is a particular concern for students who straddle a letter boundary. The instructor should discuss grades of the student without reference to the participant pool (I know that is almost impossible, but it is the ideal).

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Compensation cannot be excessive. Hence, one cannot offer a combination of credit points and money that would be excessive. The value of a credit point is set to be “approximately” equivalent to the same amount of time devoted to studying. That is, an hour of studying should net about 1 grade point and a hour of participation should net about 1 grade point. Of course, this was based on my experience, and there will be individual differences in this relationship. Hence, offering 20 \$ and a credit point for one hour of work would be excessive. This is also the reason that online surveys only net ½ a credit point regardless of length (there may be exceptions). Most surveys are short and can be completed in the comfort of one’s home, at the time of one’s choosing. This is not comparable to a study that requires a participant to travel to the university, to a lab for a particular scheduled time. The compensation should be as “equivalent” (in terms of effort) as possible across studies.

In multi-session studies, credit points should be granted at the end of each session. This is the typical operation of the subject pool so this should not be a problem. The University REB has this stipulation because granting all the compensation at the end of a multi-session study would create too much pressure to complete the all sessions. The participant would not feel free to terminate at any time.

### **PreTest (Screening)**

The current subject pool provides the provision for a pretest. This pretest is a questionnaire that is designed to identify members of particular subpopulations (students) that represent only a small proportion of the student population. Students who meet specific criteria are then eligible for studies that are restricted to those subpopulations.

Students complete the pretest early in the term. Completion of the pretest is voluntary. In fact, completion of each and every question on the pretest is voluntary. If, upon completion, a student participant should be identified as eligible for a particular study, then the description of that particular study will be listed along with all other studies that the student is eligible for. The one extra study is not made salient or outstanding. Students who do not meet the eligibility requirements never see the study. That is, studies that have eligibility restrictions are simply invisible to students who do not meet the criteria.

The pretest must proceed through its own ethical review, which is, in many ways, more complicated than a standard protocol. Creation of the pretest is accomplished by a special subcommittee of the Departmental Ethics Committee.

### **Cost**

The subject pool is not free. The department pays a yearly licence/maintenance fee. This fee is quite modest and a cost analysis indicated that licencing would be more cost effective than trying to create and maintain an in-house system.

This cost is recovered from researchers who use the participant pool. For all principal investigators (i.e., faculty), there is a yearly cost that is about 100 \$. This fee covers all the post-docs, research associates and assistants, graduate students, and undergraduate students associated with that principle investigator. This fee allows unlimited access. There is no provision for a fee per use (i.e., per participant tested). It was tried but it was simply too unwieldy when accounts had to be settled.

For any reasonable number of participants (more than 5), this fee is a bargain. If one calculates the cost per participant without a subject pool then one arrives at a figure near 20 \$. Without a subject pool, there is at least an hour associated with recruitment of each participant (i.e., in the initial contact and in the phone tag associated with scheduling). This is the RAs time at whatever the going rates are. In addition, there would be hours tied up in the tracking of credit points, and the submission of various forms to various instructors. Finally, there would be many hours devoted to the creation and placement of recruitment materials (e.g., posters). Older members of the department (such as me) can attest to the nightmare that existed before the online subject pool. That nightmare was still a participant pool (but not online), but it was all managed using pounds of paper and tons of time. It took two secretaries two solid weeks at the end of term to collate all the credit points per class. Using the online system, it takes one secretary two minutes.

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Anyone who wants to use the participant pool must pay, or be a part of a lab that has already paid (or agreed to pay). This is a legitimate expense for most research grants.