

Student Research Participation for Course Credit

Introduction.

The term “subject pool” refers to a group of individuals who are available to investigators as potential participants in research studies. In this document, we describe REB guidelines for subject pools that comprise students and in which students participate in research as part of a course. This research participation may be part of the course requirements or may result in extra credit. These guidelines do not apply to students who participate in research activities in which the main goal is to teach or train specific research skills (e.g., learning how to interview classmates as part of a methods course).

Subject pools present several important ethical issues. The TCPS interpretation document, “Use of Student Subject/Participant Pools in Research”, provides an excellent discussion of these issues in a Canadian context. This document can be found at <http://pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/tcps-epct/interpretations/interpretation024/>.

Potential Risks.

Students within subject pools can be considered a “vulnerable population” because they are in a subordinate position to their instructors, who require or promote research participation. As such, students require special protection. Further, faculty should be sensitive to the power imbalance inherent in the teacher-student relationship and the existence of possible conflicts of interest related to their dual role as teacher/researcher (TCPS, Article 2.4e).

The major risk related to subject pools is perceived coercion to participate in research. Coercion violates the ethical principle that research participation must be voluntary (TCPS, Article 2.2). The risk of coercion is most clearly apparent when participation is required as part of the structure of a course. When participation is not required but results in extra credit, the potential for perceived coercion may appear reduced. However, the grades of students who choose not to participate in research are disadvantaged relative to those of their participating classmates, which may create strong pressure to become a research participant. Thus, these guidelines apply to conditions in which research participation is either required or optional for bonus points.

In order for student subject pools to be consistent with the TCPS principle requiring free and voluntary consent, it is important to provide students with equivalent alternatives to research participation. Such alternative activities should be comparable to research participation in time commitment, effort, accessibility, difficulty, and attractiveness. These non-research options should allow the student to meet course requirements or earn extra credit to the same extent as research involvement. Further, students should not be penalized (e.g., lose marks) for not

participating in research or withdrawing from a study (TCPS Article 2.2). For the purposes of these guidelines, we consider withdrawal as disengagement from the research at any point after indicating consent to participate.

Potential Benefits.

The most commonly cited justification for having students participate in research is that they will receive educational benefit from their involvement (see, for example, Bowman & Waite, 2003).

In addition to the potential educational benefit to the participants themselves, proponents of subject pools also often claim benefit to the scientific community. This more general benefit results from a readily available source of participants for faculty and student research. Both graduate and undergraduate student researchers, therefore, receive educational benefit from the research involvement of other students. Indeed, in a “pay it forward” process, for example, psychology majors who participate in a subject pool in their first year may receive direct benefit in their own research training from the participation of future students. It should be noted, however, that instructors might be in a conflict of interest with respect to student participation in the pool. Faculty may receive direct benefit from the participation of their students, which would further their own research careers.

Mitigation of risks and enhancement of benefit.

The REB recommends that faculty who organize and use student subject pools employ the following strategies to mitigate potential coercion and increase the likelihood that students will receive educational benefit from their research experience. These guidelines were drawn from a number of sources, including Diamond (1992), Lindsay and Holden (1987), Sieber (1999) and the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists*.

1. Students should be provided with a method for fulfilling course requirements or receiving extra credit that is equivalent to participating in research. Some examples of non-research options include reading and summarizing a journal article, observing an ongoing study in person or watching a video, and assisting in data collection. The alternate activity should be comparable to the research participation requirement option in time commitment, effort, accessibility, difficulty, evaluation, and attractiveness.
2. Students should be informed about research participation requirements before enrolment in the course (e.g., in the course calendar description).
3. Instructors and teaching assistants should avoid recruiting directly from within their classes for their own studies. Someone other than the instructor or teaching assistant should present the study to students and solicit participants. Procedures must be in place to prevent the instructor or

- teaching assistant from knowing the identities of participants until after grades are assigned.
4. When possible, students should be given an opportunity to reflect on their research experience in order to maximize its pedagogical value, perhaps through seminar discussion or written assignment.
 5. Because research participation in subject pools is framed within an educational context, researchers should give students sufficient and timely debriefing about the research strategy and/or content area. This makes it more likely that students will increase their knowledge as a result of their participation.
 6. Students should not lose marks for withdrawal from a research project.
 7. Subject pool organizers should create a well-publicized mechanism for students to submit confidential complaints about their treatment as research participants or subject pool members.
 8. Subject pool organizers should communicate the specific ethical issues related to subject pools, as well as REB guidelines for reducing risk and enhancing benefit, to instructors and others using the pool.
 9. Ongoing evaluation of the subject pool procedures and student research participation should be undertaken, in which organizers and instructors can gather information about the quality of the students' experiences and the educational value of research participation. In addition, it is important to assess students' awareness of the non-research alternative activities and whether these alternatives are indeed perceived to be equivalent to research participation.
 10. Subject pool organizers should create a brief document outlining general ethical principles and procedural details for using the pool, including guidelines for instructors who include research participation as part of their courses, either as a required component or for extra-credit. This document should be submitted to the REB for review by July 1 of each year the pool is in operation highlighting any changes from the previous year.
 11. Instructors, teaching assistants, and subject pool organizers should try to reduce risks to students' privacy and confidentiality when keeping records of participation and providing research-related compensation. In addition, they should make students aware that there may be limits to confidentiality when participating in research for course credit.

References

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