

Creating Benefits for Research Participants

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Regarding “Subject to Participation” (Presidential Column, January 2012): APS President Douglas Medin should be applauded for raising questions about the relative costs and benefits for participants in psychological research. I hope that one consequence of his article is that more reports on assessments of US research participation will be forthcoming. I know that APS works with other social science organizations on proposed revisions in federal regulations for protecting human research participants. I encourage the views of actual former and potential future participants be taken into account when deciding on the ethicality of psychological research. Some studies have been done on participants’ judgments of research ethics, but measures of them should be done on a more routine basis. When conducting research with college students from the Introductory Psychology participant “pool,” I take about five minutes to describe the connection between participation in psychological research and the idea of “service learning.” Providing some kind of service to people and organizations while at the same time learning something about them has been a popular theme in education for many years. After making sure everyone understands the concept, I try to make the case that research participation is a form of service learning with benefits to all involved. On the “service” side, most students are impressed that many of the studies in their psychology textbooks were conducted with college students like themselves, and, furthermore, future textbooks might refer to some studies in which they personally participated — thereby providing a service not only to psychology and researchers but also to future students. On the “learning” side, I explain that since introductory psychology courses, unlike introductory courses in other sciences like biology, chemistry, and physics, do not have separate lab sections, the research participation component is an opportunity for hands-on experience with the methods and tools of psychological science. After participating, they also receive a take-home souvenir statement about the study plus information about where to learn more about the topic. The rationale for connecting research participation to service learning is to increase benefits to participants by showing how their contributions relate to practices valued in educational institutions and society. Medin’s article has challenged me to consider additional ways of increasing educational benefits to participants in my studies.

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