Seven Tips for Conducting Research With Low-Income Participants

November 14, 2023

Research involving people of low socioeconomic status (SES) has a troubled history. Past studies range from those painting low-income people as cognitively deficient to the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study that experimentally withheld medical treatment to impoverished Black men for decades. Understandably, this history has left many in low-SES communities wary of scientists.

But scientists need to move beyond the usual WEIRD (Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic) groups that typically make up their study samples, as research with people of lower socioeconomic status can widen our understanding of social phenomena.

So how can scientists build trust with low-income populations? In an article published in Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science (AMPPS), social psychologists Lydia F. Emery (University of Chicago), David M. Silverman (Northwestern University), and Rebecca M. Carey (Princeton University) offer a variety of suggestions on how psychological scientists can build trust with lower-SES communities. Here are some of their recommendations.
1. **Build relationships in advance.** In part due to the histories of research with lower-SES communities, people in these contexts are often leery of researchers entering their communities. Scientists can build trust by forging personal relationships with potential research participants in those settings. Develop partnerships that involve close collaborations with community members. Identify and carry out research that is relevant to the community’s strengths, needs, expertise, and interests. Position community members as equal contributors to the research process. Identify potential partners by reaching out to community organizations, schools, and other groups that represent the community.

2. **Make it personal.** As you recruit participants, emphasize your own name and that of other researchers rather than the name of your institution. A university’s name can arouse suspicion in some communities. If the institution’s name has a negative association for your participants, try featuring the name of the study and create a project logo.

3. **Recruit where it counts.** Scientists often seek participants by placing flyers and advertisements near their universities, but that’s typically not where people in lower-SES communities live. Recruit in targeted neighborhoods instead. Use locations that participants are likely to visit, including grocery stores, public libraries, laundromats, and community centers. Ask community partners about the best places to recruit.

4. **Fairly compensate.** Participants will trust you more if they know they will be properly compensated for their time. For longitudinal projects, pay them for every wave of the study. Consider nonmonetary compensation in addition to payment, such as a donation of books for local children. Ask community representatives what forms of compensation would most benefit them.

5. **Consider participants’ views about the research.** Most researchers focus on what their peers, journal editors, and reviewers will think about their work. Don’t forget to consider your participants’ perceptions. Examine how your questions might come across to the people you’re interviewing. For example, a survey that asks participants how often they consume fast food may neglect to ask about their access to fresh food or transportation to grocery stores, which could appear as dismissive of participants’ daily lives.

6. **Incorporate methods that capture the participants’ experience.** Adapt your study designs and materials to make them more appropriate and relevant to the participants. Qualitative and mixed-methods data collection, including focus groups and semistructured interviews, can help you better evaluate the individuals’ realities and avoid imposing your own narratives onto them.

7. **Secure retention.** Participants in low-income communities often drop out of studies because of time conflicts. Offer participation times both during the day and at nights and weekends to accommodate individuals working nonweekday shifts. Also consider conducting interviews and other study components in participants’ homes or other community locations to reduce the financial burden and discomfort of traveling to university labs.

The authors also cited the need for structural changes in the research enterprise. Institutional review boards should examine how compensation policies and other standards may inhibit research with
participants from lower-SES backgrounds, they wrote. Graduate programs might also consider training students on methods for working with lower-SES populations, they added.

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